

Sermon 6th August 2006 Heb 12: 5 - 13

God Disciplines His Children

This is a difficult and sobering passage – the writer to the Hebrews uses a metaphor of domestic discipline to explain how God disciplines his children

It's the kind of passage that many preachers would probably wish to steer clear of today

I was talking to a lady recently and she told me that the pastor of her church always painted a picture of God as a grandfather in the sky whose only thoughts towards His children are sappy and sentimental

A grandfather who winks at his grandchildren's naughtiness and says, "Try harder next time"

Passages like this teach us that such ideas about God are really an invention of the human mind – making God into someone we feel comfortable with – the tamed Lion of Judah – turned into the clawless tabby cat

Now I do want to stress that the living God who is revealed in the Scriptures is loving and merciful and gracious and kind

But He is also to be feared – He is so holy that no human being could ever survive an encounter with Him – except Christ had died in His place – He has zero tolerance for sin and evil – He is a jealous God: he demands our full allegiance and loyalty and he is determined to purify and refine his children – that's our theme this morning

In the Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe, upon hearing that Aslan is a lion, Lucy asks "is He safe", Mrs Beaver replies, "Of course he's not safe, but he is good".

Our God is not safe – He's a fearsome and awesome God

Sometimes people say: "I don't want God to be like that"

But *we* can't modify God to be as we would like him to be like

Others say, "I cannot believe that God is like so and so" and therefore would have us believe, quite definitely that God is not like so and so. As if, if we cannot believe it, it cannot be so!

God is God and we have to come to terms with who he is and accommodate ourselves to him

We must never apologise for God or justify him or his actions

This passage concerns the matter of God disciplining and punishing his children

V5 “You have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons”

It is something that the readers of the letter seem to have forgotten – that they are sons and God and therefore could expect to be disciplined

We can forget it too

5b" My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
6because the Lord disciplines those he loves,
and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."^[a]

As you will know from the rest of the book of Hebrews, the writer is addressing his readers' difficulties and struggles

Due to their difficulties, the Hebrew Christians were in danger of giving up

Two weeks we considered how they were encouraged to look to OT examples for encouragement – people who lived and triumphed by faith

Last week we saw how they were to see the Christian life as a race with Jesus at the winning post having completed the course – they were to follow in his footsteps and imitate him

Now in this passage the writer is suggesting that some of the troubles that they are experiencing should be viewed as God's discipline – verse 7 says, “Endure hardship as discipline”

In other words, there was purpose in what was happening to them – their difficulties weren't all for nothing

So let's think about the passage under various headings

(1) WHY DOES GOD DISCIPLINE HIS PEOPLE?

(a) It is a sign that we belong to Him and that He loves us

Discipline is a bit of a dirty word these days

I recently read an article in the Guardian Newspaper which listed the 7 deadly sins of this generation – things which are sins for this present society

One of them was to discipline your children – it was saying that for many parents it is now seen as offensive to suggest that children should be disciplined

Now it wasn't talking about physical punishment (that would probably be compared to torture today!) – it was just talking about imposing and enforcing limits on your children – that was a modern day sin

Even in schools, teachers often talk about classroom management rather than discipline

Presumably the word discipline smacks of repression, heavy handedness, authoritarian practices – things that are relics from Victorian England

It seems that imposing one human being's moral code onto another (even your own child) is unacceptable in our so-called tolerant and liberated society

Children should be free to make their own choices, express themselves in whatever way is appropriate for them: only they know what is best for them

This passage is totally at odds with this view

It clearly teaches that discipline can be loving and for the good of the one who receives it

V 6 reads God disciplines those he loves

V10 God disciplines us for our good

So we shouldn't separate love from discipline

I once heard a Christian mother say that in her children's upbringing, she sought to get a balance between love and discipline

And we know what she means but her language is illogical

True love includes discipline – it is the loving thing to discipline – discipline is an aspect to love

In fact this passage goes further; it states that receiving discipline is a sign of being a true son:

V7 “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ⁸If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.”

So if God didn't discipline us, it would be a sign that he didn't love us and that we weren't his sons and daughters

Children often don't know what is best for them – they need to have loving discipline imposed upon them so that they can learn right from wrong and become useful and responsible members of society and God's family

Parents have to direct and guide their children and when they wilfully disobey they have to be corrected for their own good

In fact not correcting children, indulging them, being too soft, is not an expression of love: according to this passage is a sign of not caring, not loving, treating the child as if it is not yours

Speaking of parents, C. Ensor Walters writes,

“The love of some is a mockery. Here are parents who profess love for their children, yet are too cowardly, or too lazy to reprove or punish them. Many a boy or girl lives to curse the memory of parents who were too weak, too sentimental to reprove them and pull them up when dangers beset their pathway”

Often correcting or punishing a child gives them dignity – it is saying, “You are worth more than that” – “you are too precious for me let you get away with what you have done”

Allowing a child to become a brat is neglecting their wellbeing

So sometimes love has to be tough and this is what this passage is about

As with the parent and child so it is with God and his children

So here we have the first reason why God disciplines us – it is a sign that we belong to Him – that He cares about us

(b) Because God wants to make us useful and fit for heaven

Discipline is an essential part of the Christian's life

V10 “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness”

V11b It (discipline) produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it

God doesn't seem to be too interested in making us happy – and presentations of the Christian message that suggest that Christianity exists to make us happy misrepresent the Bible and the Gospel - what God seems to be interested in is our holiness

He wants to set us apart for himself and his purposes, now and in eternity

He wants to restore us to His original intention for Humanity – that is why we are to be conformed to the image of Christ – he perfectly reflects and images God as a Man – the more we are like him, the closer we are to being truly human and to being restored to the image of God

Even Jesus we are told (Heb 2) learned obedience and was perfected through the things that he suffered – and if he had to be perfected in this way, how much more we?

God is determined to perfect us

The aim of life is not that our lives be intensified (as our society thinks) but rather transformed

Paul said that we are God's workmanship (Eph 2) – he makes us into what he wants us to be

One preacher I know wrote, "God is like the master artist – he's producing a masterpiece. He could slap on some paint and say, 'That'll do'. But he doesn't, he's a perfectionist. He takes endless trouble and gives the canvas endless trouble – rubbing, scraping, washing off, redoing, painting over. This can be painful. It's rough for the canvas. But it's reassuring to know that the artist is committed to his work and loves it".

There are many things that we seem able to learn whilst life is easy – things that we can only learn when life is hard

Often it takes difficult circumstances to deflect us away from the old well-trodden paths that we have always gone down – the soft and convenient route

It seems that we only really grow spiritually during times of difficulty

John Stott writes, "No man or woman has ever grown into maturity as a Christian without suffering"

God wants to mature us; to put backbone into us, shape us and remake us

He wants to break the old sinful habits and smash the dependencies that we construct to make us feel (falsely) safe and secure

He checks our complacency, self-sufficiency and smugness

He wants to wean us off our idols, our self-centred lives and lifestyles and conform us to his will and purposes

Trying to explain suffering, Malcolm Muggeridge wrote: “[its purpose is] to stem the tendency of this unspeakable little creature, man, to feel over important and over-pleased with himself”.

So often it is the loss of small meanings through suffering that forces us to look for greater and more ultimate meanings – ones that we’ve been too distracted to notice or even care about

Sometimes God disciplines us to help us understand others – to know what it means to face humiliation, disappointment and temptation

I remember talking to a man about some difficulties I was having

At the end of the conversation he said to me, “I’ve got nothing to say to you. I’ve got no answers. All I can say is that I’ve been there”

And that was great consolation

Difficult experiences unlock doors to understanding situations that no other keys can unlock

(2) HOW DOES HE DISCIPLINE HIS CHILDREN?

This passage suggests that God uses circumstances to mould us and shape us

As we’ve already said, that’s the context of the passage – the writer implies that what was happening to the Hebrew Christians was at least partly God’s discipline and punishment

Verse 7 says, “Endure hardship as discipline” – in other words treat your difficulties as God’s training of you

The circumstances they were experiencing were persecutions, imprisonments, loss of possessions, being publically insulted and ridiculed

(As we saw last week) they were following in the footsteps of their Master Jesus (the man of sorrows), whom the writer tells them to consider and to look as their hero

So what kind of things does God use or allow in our lives to discipline us?

(a) Difficult circumstances

There are many times when we ask, why? Why is this or that happening to us?

Life is hard going. Nothing seems to be working out.

Why can't life just be simple?

We cry with Job, "Man is of few days and full of trouble"

And when we do, we need to ask, "Is this God's discipline? Is God trying to teach me something through this? What is he saying?"

For the child of God, discipline is inevitable

So what kinds of things does God use to discipline us?

I said to you two weeks ago that in life we often seek:

- Straightforward circumstances
- Simple relationships
- A hassle free life
- Things going according to plan and order

But it's often the absence of these things in which God disciplines us

It might be:

- Difficulties in relationships
- Financial struggles
- Health issues
- Employment issues
- Disappointments
- Unfulfilled longings
- Frustrations

(b) Struggles in our Christian Life

- Periods when God seems silent or remote or when we feel deserted by Him
- Dryness of spirit
- Struggles in prayer
- When we lose the vision, the joy, the peace, the liberty

Like the Psalmist we cry:

"Why, do you stand far off?

"Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"

It could be many things that God uses

It seems that God's control over our lives is so complete that our circumstances are tailored in such a way as to teach us specific things – things that are pertinent to our growth

Before we finish this section I want to address an important matter here

The discipline and punishment we are talking about here is not in order that God will accept us

It's important to remember that this passage is not about us being punished for our sins

If we are Christians, we have accepted that Christ has been punished and has died on our behalf for our salvation

God disciplining and punishing us, cannot add one dot to the finished work of Christ on the cross – it would be blasphemous to think that it could

We are accepted on Christ's merits alone

He has received the retribution that we deserve

The punishment we are considering here is not retributive, it is reformative

We are no longer rebels with God acting as judge

Instead God is acting in his capacity as the Father of his Sons and Daughters

(3) HOW SHOULD WE REACT TO GOD'S DISCIPLINE?

The discipline that God subjects us to doesn't automatically bring about the fruit that God intends – how we react to it determines whether or not it is effective

The writer to the Hebrews mentions two things that they shouldn't do:

(a) Do not make light of the Lord's discipline (v5) Greek: Think little of

So we shouldn't ignore what God is saying or doing – we shouldn't ignore its importance

In the midst of difficulties we shouldn't say, "I can cope; I can manage on my own"

In difficulties we need to draw upon God's strength and rely on him

But most of all we need to hear what he is saying

In those famous words of CS Lewis: “Pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures. He speaks in our conscience but he shouts in our pain. It’s his megaphone to rouse a dead world”

In verse 11 we read “No discipline seems pleasant at the time but painful”

We should accept that it is painful and not make light of it – not pretend its’ not a problem

Read: *A Grief Observed* and *The Problem of Pain*

(b) V5 b: Do not lose heart when he rebukes you

There is a danger that some people give up altogether when they face God’s discipline

They opt out of the race claiming that God is cruel or that he doesn’t care or that he doesn’t know what he is doing or that life isn’t fair

Some end up claiming that God can’t exist after all – if he did, life wouldn’t be like this, they say

Others get angry and bitter with God and take it out on those around them – especially those closest to them

Some fight God on every issue and refuse to submit to him and go half-insane in the process

Others run away from difficult circumstances and so run way from God’s chosen plan to change them in the midst of them – he usually out runs us and reengineers them in the next situation

We will have particular problems if our theology says that we ought to be triumphant all the time – the victorious living model

It suggests that we are never allowed to be failures; that if we have problems we can’t possibility admit them because it would mean we’re not living as Christians should

Passages like this persuade us that the Christians life is not always like that

So how then are we to react?

We are to submit to God’s dealings with us

Submit to his authority

Learn the lessons

We should always be asking, “What is God saying; what is He doing?”

We should listen to him

I have a missionary friend who talks about going through with God in difficulties

I kind of know what she means

Some people when faced with difficulties shrink back and wait for them to pass

But the right way is to say, “Lord I know that you are speaking to me – you are taking me through things I wouldn’t choose. But you know what is best for me. Mould me and shape me, have your way in my life”

We are to accept that we don’t know is best for our lives – God does

That in the midst of all our troubles He is working our lives into something beautiful

We just don’t have the perspective that He has

One of the tenets of liberalism (upon which our society is founded) is that only we finally know what is good for us – but often we don’t: we see things from a very time- bound and narrow perspective

We can’t look at things from an eternal perspective as God can

Augustine said that when we suffer we are like a child who is being smacked – they only see it in context of the moment and think that it hurts

But the parent sees the long term growth and development of the child and knows that in the long run the child will be taught right from wrong, that there are consequences for bad behaviour that he/she needs to learn, that they can’t just do what they want in life

The child takes the immediate view; the parent takes the long view even though it may be hard for them to punish their child

Julie and I know a L’Abri worker.

He told us that after he has smacks one of his children he always cries more than they do. But he smacks them because as their father he loves them too much to tolerate them behaving in a certain ways

As far as we are able we have to trust that God knows what he is doing – he has the long view

Our lives are like a great tapestry – God is weaving something beautiful

One day we will see the front of it and be astounded, but now we only see the back of the tapestry and only a little section of it at any one time

So all we see is a great web of disjointed and different coloured threads

But God is the great embroider – he knows what he is doing – he can see the front

We will too but we will have to wait for that

Often like the child we don't just know what's good for us

You may not believe it, but in verse 5 we are told that this message is a message of encouragement

We are to remember that God's discipline reminds us that we belong to him; that we are his sons and daughters, that he is treating us like this because he loves us: "I no longer belong to the world...he has sent his Son to die for me that I may enter his family and become part of his household"

But in his household he knocks us into shape – He makes us fit to be sons and daughters of the King of King – fit to be royal children – fit to be one day be the wife of His Son

Even Jesus had to be perfected through suffering - how much more we?

We have a high destiny: God has great plans for the future and will use us in them – and being fit for that destiny takes a lot of discipline and training

It may seem painful for now but in the end it will produce benefits that far outweigh the pain

Even here we often look back and say I came to know God though that experience

How good God was to me is that situation – I really came to know him

I would never have learned the lessons I learned in any other way

God is the great and wise Father who knows what he's doing
