
To Change and Grow

Hebrews 12

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Discipline is an interesting word and concept. We are watching in business and government an appalling lack of self-discipline and a ruinous lack of discipline by leaders on both sides of the aisle.

Thankfully, the children of God are always being disciplined, chastened by a loving Father. He is not an indulgent parent who is doing the best He can. With sovereign wisdom, He is correcting and instructing His children. Yes, Christians can live without self discipline and fall into sin. But every true Christian is experiencing the loving chastening, the correction and instruction of His Father. The most important New Testament text on this subject is Hebrews 12.

The key to handling chastening is in the word, “endure” which give structure to this text.

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

...

⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. **God is treating you as sons.** For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?

Interesting, isn't it? Enduring... Really?

Run with endurance...

Jesus endured the cross...

Jesus endured opposition from people...

You endure because God is treating you as sons...

Let's think about this together as we seek to grow and change through the loving correction and instruction of our Father.

The Purposes for Chastening

(v.1)

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

To Deal with Weights

The analogy is drawn from Olympic track racing. Weights kept the runner from competing. Chastening can be to help us set aside things that may not be sin but are keeping us from running well.

There are things in the Christian life that may be allowed, but will become a hindrance to your endurance. This is an important category for us, and especially for our young people. It is an important category in our finances and our relationships. Will this, whatever it is, hinder me from running well? We need to ask this over our music, our reading, our movies, our TV, our sports, our relationships, our money, our things.

To Deal with Sins

Chastening is also to help us deal with sins. Chastening is how God deals with sins in our lives. Chastening is never "punishment" – it is never retributive. Our sin was punished at the cross and judged in Christ. Chastening is corrective training. It is designed to help us know when we are sinning, how it displeases the Father and to help us stop sinning,

So there are the sins that entangle our legs and tie us up so that we not only do not run well, but actually fall down and fail to finish. Sin will keep us from running well. It will deftly and cleverly entwine itself around us ever tightening its deathly grip until we are no longer running the race because we are completely absorbed in battling the sin. I can tell you that if you are going to deal with entangling sins, you have got to be utterly committed to running and finishing well. Otherwise, the battle with sin, with its victories and setbacks, will become a substitute for the race itself.

This is what our loving Father is doing – with sovereign, good and wise strategies He is chastening us for our good. Now this leads to a question: how do we know when we are being chastened? Let me ask the question this way: how do you know when God is working to cause you to grow and change? When is God doing child-training in your life?

Listen to me carefully. I suspect that behind that question is that we're thinking of chastening as punishment. Let me ask this: do you think that if you rarely sinned that you would rarely be chastened? Do you think Jesus was ever chastened? I think this is what is meant by Hebrews 5:8, "*Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him...*" So be sure that you are not troubled by chastening because you think you are being punished.

In one sense I do not find that the Bible answers that question. In none of the five major texts on our loving Father's discipline are we given a definitive, "This is how you know you are being chastened." All suffering, hardship, adversity is set in the larger context of discipline and training. It encourages us to view the hardship and difficulties in our lives *first* through the lens of discipline, God at work to deal with sin and to deal with weights. While hardship, suffering, difficulties, unexpected reverses may have other purposes the

Bible views them as chastening. Since we are not being punished, then the Bible views all of this as either corrective or instructive. Most suffering has multiple purposes but all suffering should be seen through the nurture/admonition lens. Think of Deuteronomy 8, Job 5 and now Hebrews 12. In each of these, we find this, "Do not despise the chastening of the Lord..." and each of them has suffering and hardship as a key *reason* to say that.

So, when you are going through a hard time, suffering, loss, guilt over sin, hard questions over good things ask yourself these questions first:

Is my loving Father bringing CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE to show me my sin and to help me overcome it so that I will change and grow in holiness?

Is my loving Father bringing INSTRUCTIVE DISCIPLINE to help me deal with things that may be preventing me for changing and growing in maturity and ministry?

Am I responding to these things contrary to how the Bible wants me to because I am not thinking of them the way the Bible wants me to?

The Examples given for our Enduring

(v.1-3)

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

The Old Testament Saints

(v.1)

The word here is never used of someone who is a mere observer. The point here is not that we ought to behave in such a way because these people are watching us. They are not observers (and neither are your Christian relatives who have died) of this world's struggles. The word is "one who testifies." They are people who have experienced something or seen something to which they are bearing witness. It is through the pages of Scripture that they bear witness. We read of their lives, their faith, their struggles, their accomplishments and defeats and see them prizing God and treasuring Jesus and clinging to promises. So we hear their testimony. We go back and read and reflect and ponder deeply the significance of what their lives say to us.

The Lord Jesus Christ

(v.2)

Look intently at the Lord Jesus Christ. This is not some casual consideration like we consider buying a pair of tennis shoes. This is a deep look into His life and the example He set for us. His example for us was of being willing to endure the murderous hatred of His religious fellows. He endured all the way to the electric chair, the gas chamber, the cross. And we struggle with the chastening of someone opposing our plans, of financial setbacks, of health issues. When God's loving chastening seems too hard, look to Jesus.

The Problems we Experience in Chastening**(v.3b-5a)**

³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. ⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

We are sinned against by others**(v.3)**

The Hebrew Christians were experiencing God's chastening through people who turned against them, reported them to the authorities, sent them to prison and took away their property. God often chastens us through the sin of others against us. We find this so hard to bear. We want to strike out. We want to get even. We turn to hatred and bitterness. Being sinned against is a great and difficult problem when we are being sinned against.

One more implication: others may sin against you by misunderstanding, misinterpreting and misadvising you in the midst of chastening. Ah, think of Job. HE had three loving friends who really meant well. And poor Job is going through the horrors he went through for almost none of the reasons his friends and wife thought. I think this is the hardest to bear. You have God's rod hard on your back; why must you have your friends tongues hard on your ears?

We become discouraged.**(v.3b)**

This is what is meant becoming weary and faint of heart. We need to look to the examples in the Old Testament and in Jesus so that we will not become depressed when suffering and hardship come.

In the midst of a loving Father's chastening, be alert to emotions and actions that often are labeled, "depression". Do not succumb to discouragement and being down cast. Look away to Jesus and draw encouragement and hope and help from him.

We lose perspective.**(v.4)**

The author here wryly asks, "How many of you have so fought against sin that you are bleeding?" Now we are not talking about cutting, young people. We are talking about a mighty resistance to sin and a mighty commitment to dealing with weights. The allusion here is probably to the Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

We need to be so careful while being chastened that we do not lose perspective. We forget the Father who loves us. We don't value the character it is to produce in us. We don't treasure the good it brings to others. We are not living for our future joy or for God's glory.

We forget Scripture.**(v.5a)**

Why do we lose heart and lose perspective and become overwhelmed by the stress of our situation and the suffering of our hardships? Because we have forgotten the truths and exhortations and encouragement that come to us in the Word. We see our author telling them that they are risking losing heart and perspective because they have forgotten a very simple but profound text in Proverbs 3:11-12. That text in Proverbs is nested between trusting the Lord in all our ways (3:5-8), honoring the Lord with all our wealth (3:9-10) and finding wisdom as a chief end of life (3:13ff). So the chastening hand of God requires trust, obedience and leads to wisdom.

Listen to me loved ones; the Scriptures are more than just a theological textbook or a therapeutic sourcebook. They are the very truths of God shaping our hearts, renewing our minds, motivating our wills and directing our conduct. These people were not finding help and solace and direction from the Word. So God's chastening came to them and threatened them and shook them to the foundations.

So I think it is fair to say that the believers in this passage are under tremendous stress; they are enduring some form of hostility; they are wrestling with great sorrow and are in danger of growing weary of the battle and losing heart. Together with them, you are to give careful consideration to Christ *in order that* you do not grow weary or fainthearted. You must train your souls to pay attention to and to think much about the Lord Jesus with the aim of encouragement and endurance.

So this grace gives us endurance – it fixes the soul on Christ so that we receive power and gain perspective.

Our Perspective on Chastening

(v.5-11)

Now, our author then takes us to the Scriptures and a Psalm that we must not forget.

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reprov'd by him.
⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Let me remind you of four important things you must not forget from Scripture that gives you God's perspective on chastening.

It is God's discipline

(v.5-6)

It is God who is administering your chastening. Now others may be the rod. But behind the rod is your loving Father. He is controlling exactly what is happening and is measuring it out at the right time, in the right way with the right means. It is God who is chastening.

Now this is very difficult for many. It is somewhat easy to see how God controls circumstances and nature so that He can use them as discipline. I catch a cold in the midst of basking in Bible Conference accolades to remind me that I am lowly and needy. God can control disease and car breakdowns and broken house pipes to bring those kinds of pressures to bear helping us get rid of weights and sins.

But, what about people? Does God control the hostility of sinners against us so that we will be tested over sin? That is exactly what verses 3-4 are saying. The hostility of sinners and the hardships of life are both equally under the sovereign control of God. The cold germs

and the horrid server at breakfast are both under God's control, bringing testing and discipline as He sees fit and as He deems necessary.

And you need to embrace this truth as well. I have drawn much strength, encouragement and hope in the midst of two very dark periods in my life. Then, God was at work to chasten and to refine me through the open hostility of people in my life. While it was painful and hard, this truth sustained me.

So, whether it is the hardship of suffering or the hostility of sinners, all discipline is being designed and determined by God. He is crafting it so that it is exactly suited to help you lay aside weights and sins and to enable you to run with endurance the race

It reveals relationship

(v.7-8)

Understand this: hardship and discipline confirm, not conceal relationship. The hardships that come from the loving disciplines of our heavenly Father assure us that we are truly His sons. Discipline is for all. It is how we know that we are loved. Every son and daughter the Father receives is disciplined by the skillful hand guided by the loving, holy heart of God. Every child of God receives chastening. Every one of you.

If we are without the disciplining hand of God then we are illegitimate or more frankly, bastards. We are pretending what is not so. We are not true sons of heaven, only lost sons of earth. Will you believe this? Will you look carefully in your life and trace out with joy the disciplining hardships God has brought to you, controls for you and assures you through them that you are His?

It requires submission

(v.9)

If we respect our earthly father's correction, what should be the response to our heavenly Father's chastening? Our author assumes that you respected parents who were correcting and chastening and disciplining you. We then ought to respect and submit to our heavenly Father's chastening. We have seen the interplay of believing truth and bowing to the Lord throughout this text. To respond well to the Lord's chastening, you have to believe in it and you have to be willing to submit your desires to Him.

Is this important? Yes. Those who submit with reverence to the discipline of God, *live*. True believers who resist the chastening hardships of the Father may well be taken on home. Witness Ananias and Sapphira in the book of Acts as well as the abusers of the Lord's Table at Corinth. So let us not treat this lightly as though the only thing at stake is a little emotional distress. So, do not resist the chastening of God. Submit to it. Endure it with a sense of joy in the future. Bow down your heart when it wants to chafe under the hand of God. Bend your will to the holy will of God. The hardships gladly submitted to will profit us so much more.

It is for our good**(v.10-11)**

Here is the reason that we ought to submit to the Father of lights whose hand is chastening us – it is for our good, our holiness. How does he argue for this?

First, *by contrast* to the discipline we received from earthly fathers. They, whom we are to respect, disciplined for a short time and as best they could. The clear intent here is to show that earthly fathers, even when correcting and chastening children, are very limited in what they do and how long they can do it. But not so with God. He not only knows perfectly what is good for us, but also what He is aiming for. The ultimate aim, that is, our holiness, shapes the “good for us”. We could possibly say here that God is perfectly designing His chastening to be good for our holiness.

Second, *by comparison* to the cultivating and harvesting of fruit by a skilled farmer. He starts by asserting what all of us know in our hearts but don't like to admit. The pain of chastening is worth the gain it brings. All discipline is by design supposed to be painful. But it is also supposed to cultivate and yield righteousness. The peace that comes from becoming holy sons and daughters is what is pleasant. What it takes to produce it may not be, but what it produces is.

Third, *by confirming* the value of its process. Notice how he says this: “those trained by it.” We talk about discipline and call it child training. The wise and good discipline of a sovereign God benefits you who are submissive to it, profit from it and are therefore trained by it. Yet there may be true sons and daughters who are not trained by God's chastening because you resist it.

So be the kind of son and daughter who looks up into the face of your loving Father who is affirming your relationship with you, exhibiting his wisdom to you and is training you in holiness through the hardships He directs to you. Be the kind of person who believes by faith that this pain is bringing great gain. Believe by faith that He is chastening for your good and His glory.

Our Responsibilities in Chastening

(v.12-14)

We have some responsibilities in chastening. These are drawn from Isaiah 35:3 and Proverbs 4:26-27. Notice that it starts with a “therefore”. Since what we have said is true, then here is how you are to respond.

¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. ¹⁴ Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

These are both personal and shared responsibilities. They are what you must ensure you do and what you can do for others.

Watch out for signs of faltering.

Three verbs here continue the running analogy. Our author is not thinking about sprints. He is thinking about cross-country. Drooping hands are signs of weariness. Weak knees are places of vulnerability. Straight paths call for wise running. All three of these call you to run well by intentionally thinking about finishing well. You are responsible to keep watch over yourself and to deal with things that may prevent you from enduring chastening well.

Don't become permanently disabled.

I see the word, “lame”. The concern is for permanent disability. If you do not take care over how you respond to the Father's chastening, you may well become permanently disabled in the spiritual life. You are limping around all over the road of God's will and soon you are going to be spiritually crippled for life. You have a responsibility, in the midst of hardship and discipline, to avoid becoming crippled by it.

Go after what is really important.

In the midst of chastening, pursue peace with people and holiness with God. These are the important things. This is what is most valuable. In hardship, we often do just the opposite. We start breaking relationships and we slide down into disobedience and sin. Often this is simply because we are focused on ourselves. We become our own treasure. When the rod is upon your back, pursue what is truly valuable.

Do all this because you want to see God someday.

The Dangers in not Responding to Chastening Well

(v.15-17)

¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; ¹⁶ that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷ For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

We will become bitter

(v.15)

Bitterness is particularly dangerous to disciplined saints because:

It disturbs – It causes trouble. Bitterness is often the root feeding the flower of dissension and dissatisfaction. It pollutes the spiritual atmosphere and poisons relationships.

It defiles – Bitterness has a defiling and staining effect on saints. Bitterness is contagious. It wants to multiply its misery and spread its stain. Bitterness not rooted out will affect the whole person. You will see it in the countenance and in the conduct. It will sharpen the tongue and shorten the temper. And ongoing bitterness can defile and poison a church.

The solution to bitterness? Grace enabled forgiveness. Love driven reconciliation. Going hard after peace and holiness for the sake of seeing God. Take control of your thoughts. Stop mulling over both your real and imagined slights. Take advantage of the grace God is giving you right in the midst of your hardship to rejoice and not be bitter.

Will you give up your bitterness? Bitterness, like all sins, is pleasurable. It has a sense of “rightness” to it. You can allow it to germinate and soon it will grow into a habit. Then it will so entwine itself in your character that you hug it to yourself and refuse to let it go. Will you take the cross and cut sharply and uproot deeply any beginning sprig of bitterness?

We will not value what is important

(v.16-17)

Resisting the grace of God may lead to bitterness and end in moral and spiritual failure. Look at how this condition is described. It is described as being sexually impure. It is described as being unhallowed or debased. It is like Esau who traded away his birthright, that is his spiritual and material inheritance for a bowl of bean soup.

Why are we liable to become immoral or godless like Esau? Because of an underlying problem that hardship tends to uncover. We do not value the eternal and too often are too willing to trade its blessings for the immediate and present. What God is doing in the design of His loving discipline is for the long term. Some of it will not yield a full harvest of righteousness whose fruit looks like peace for years to come.

Think with me for a moment. Look at what is at stake. His spiritual inheritance is at risk. Yet the choice does not feel like something that important. He is famished and here is food at a price. Yet, what happened cannot be undone and so the dire consequences. Thus we must hear and heed. Sometimes what might appear to be small trades and inconsequential compromises may lead to spiritual ruin.

Why is this danger so great? Look at what happened to Esau. He could not change the consequences of his choices though he sought it with tears. His early trade led to unchangeable

results. Once his father had given the birthright to Jacob, there was no way to undo what was done. Esau was sorry about the consequences, but not about the cause.

Now these are hard words. And for many of you this will require an adjustment in your theology. Loved ones, it is possible to keep resisting the grace of God and keep allowing bitterness to grow and keep trading away the eternal blessings for present pleasures until we cross a line and we cannot find a way back. We must submit to the Father of lights and *live*. This is a very sober warning. Yes, Jesus bore the punishment for every sin. And yes, if we confess our sins, God will forgive us. But the consequences of our failures may so pile up that God will not and does not undo them. May God in His mercy preserve us from such a fate.

Loved ones; watch over yourselves and others to see that no one keeps on resisting God's enabling grace or allows bitterness to grow or keeps on trading away eternal blessings for present pleasures. Some need to repent now lest you come to a place where tears will be shed over a life unusable for God.

Reflect and Respond

- *WHAT IS GOD WORKING ON IN YOUR LIFE NOW?* Some of you are experiencing a season of blessing. Others of you are experiencing a season of hardship. God is behind both of these for your good and His glory. Do not become weary. Do not become small souled. Do not forget what the Bible tells you. Endure as under the discipline of God.
- *HOW IS HE BRINGING CHASTENING TO YOU?* Your life will almost certainly not have the same details as in this text. But you will suffer hardship and hostility. God may bring illness or financial distress, family struggles or opposition, personal difficulties or spiritual dryness. Whatever it is in your life, you must see it, welcome it and be changed by it.
- *HOW ARE RESPONDING TO THAT DISCIPLINE?* Will we rejoice in that we are assured that we are His children? We should find real rest in knowing that His hand is showing His love even in the hardship.
- *WILL RIGHTEOUSNESS OR REBELLION BE ITS FRUIT?* Will we "be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?" Or will we rebel against the father of spirits, and die? Will we trust him? If we submit to this sovereign, loving, fatherly care, we will not "grow weary and lose heart," but we will keep the faith, fight the good fight, and finish our course, and die well, and glorify our Father in heaven.

Look to Jesus
Consider Him who endured for you.