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RESPONDING TO GOD'S DISCIPLINE

Hebrews 12:7-11

By

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December 12, 2004

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Hebrews Lesson 46

Responding to God's Discipline Hebrews 12:7-11

As an old man looking back on his life, the late Malcolm Muggeridge observed,

Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, everything I have learned, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness. If it ever were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence, the result would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal and trivial to be enduring (A *Twentieth Century Testimony* [Thomas Nelson], in *Reader's Digest* [1/91], p. 158).

By way of contrast, many have allowed difficult trials to turn them away from God. For example, I have read that media mogul, Ted Turner, grew up in a church-going home. But when his sister died, Turner's father grew bitter and turned away from God. Ted Turner followed his father's example.

Trials are a fact of life, but how we respond to them is our choice. I do not know if Muggeridge was truly converted, but he seems to have grown *better* through his trials. Turner, however, grew *bitter*. I grant that it is difficult to understand how God can be *both* good *and* omnipotent, and yet allow the horrible suffering that we see in the world. But to cease to believe in God on account of suffering does not make God cease to exist, and it does not resolve the problem. To "run with endurance the race that is set before us" (12:1), we need to know how God wants us to respond to His loving discipline. Our text teaches that...

To respond properly to the Father's discipline, submit to it and grow in holiness through it.

That word, *submit*, grates on many souls. I have read Christian psychologists who say that those who grew up in "dysfunctional" homes have a problem with authority figures. They urge such per-

sons to “find an authority figure and disagree with him” in order to assert their own authority! I would *not* recommend that approach! A “Frank & Ernest” cartoon expressed it well. The two bunglers are standing at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter has a scowl on his face. Frank whispers to Ernie, “If I were you, I’d change my shirt, Ernie.” Ernie’s shirt reads, “Question Authority.”

God is the *Ultimate Authority!* Whether you like His program for your life or not, it is not wise to rebel against it. As verse 9 tells us, if we submit to the Father of our spirits, we will live. Bishop Westcott (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 402) puts it, “True life comes from complete self-surrender.” The author of Hebrews gives us three reasons why we should submit to God’s loving discipline:

1. We should submit to the Father’s discipline because it is an essential aspect of the father-son relationship (12:7-8).

The opening phrase of 12:7 may be translated as either an indicative (NASB, “It is for discipline that you endure”) or an imperative (NIV, “Endure hardship as discipline”). Either way, the point of these verses is that discipline is a mark of genuine sonship. As I said last week, I never disciplined other people’s disobedient children. But I did discipline my children, because I love them and I wanted them to grow up to respect proper authority.

The author states that if you lack discipline, you are not a true child of God, but rather illegitimate. In that day, illegitimate children had no inheritance. To be an heir of the promise of eternal life, make sure that you are a genuine child of God through faith in Christ (Gal. 3:26). If you are His child, then trials are an evidence of His love, not of His neglect or opposition (12:6).

But, since both believers and unbelievers alike go through trials, what does the author mean when he says that some are “without discipline”? How can we know if the trials that we go through are an evidence of our being God’s true children?

The primary answer, as I just said, is, “Have I truly repented of my sins and trusted in Christ alone to save me?” If so, the further answer lies in *how we respond* to the trials that come our way. A true child of God submits to Him in the trial and seeks to grow in holiness. An illegitimate child shrugs it off as bad luck or, worse,

turns against God and grows bitter. Also, if a true child of God sins, he will be troubled about it. David was miserable after he sinned (see Psalms 38 & 51). An illegitimate child will gloat that he got away with it or shrug off his sin as no big deal. But a true child of God submits to the Father's discipline, because such discipline is an essential part of the father-son relationship.

2. We should submit to the Father's discipline because He perfectly administers it for our eternal good, that we may share His holiness (12:9-10).

The author makes two points in these verses:

- A. If the imperfect discipline of our earthly fathers was beneficial, how much more beneficial is our heavenly Father's perfect discipline.

Verse 9 contrasts "the fathers of our flesh" (earthly fathers) with "the Father of [our] spirits" (our heavenly Father). The expression, *fathers of our flesh*, focuses on their imperfection. Every earthly father falls short in his knowledge of his children and in wisdom as to how to train and discipline them. But our heavenly Father knows each of us thoroughly and perfectly, including all of our thoughts and motives. He deals with us in perfect wisdom.

While good fathers always try to act in love, they often fail. But God always acts in love, seeking our highest good. Earthly fathers can be mean or angry, but God is never temperamental. Earthly fathers have jurisdiction over us during childhood. But God's authority and discipline extends over our lifetimes. Good earthly fathers seek to prepare us for life on earth. But God is preparing us for eternity.

The author's point is that the discipline of our earthly fathers was beneficial, even though it was flawed by human shortcomings. We respected them for it because we can see how we benefited from it. But God's discipline is absolutely perfect.

- B. Therefore, we should subject ourselves to the heavenly Father's discipline and live.

The important thing with regard to God's discipline is the spirit in which we respond. If we resist and harden our hearts, we will miss the purpose of the discipline. If we are truly God's chil-

dren, this will result in more discipline. God's intention is that we respectfully submit to it (12:9). It's possible to submit like the defiant little boy whose mother told him to sit in a chair until he calmed down. He clenched his teeth and said, "I'm sitting on the outside, but I'm standing on the inside!" That's not true submission! The psalmist reflected true submission when he proclaimed, "I know, O Lord, that Your judgments are righteous, and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me" (Ps. 119:75).

We should submit to God because He has the sovereign right to do with us as He pleases. That is the point of the Book of Job. Even though Job was the most godly man on earth, God had a perfect right to take away everything Job treasured. No man has a claim against Almighty God. One of the most stunning instances of this was when God told the prophet Ezekiel that He was about to take the desire of his eyes (his wife) with a blow. But, God told the prophet not to mourn or weep, as a spiritual object lesson to Israel. So, the next day Ezekiel's wife died and he did as God had commanded (Ezek. 24:15-24). Wow!

The prophet had learned a basic lesson that we all need to learn: *God is God and I am not God*. If the Sovereign of the universe wants to take my wife, my children, my possessions, my health, or my life, that is His prerogative. Faith eventually arrives at saying, as A. W. Pink put it (*An Exposition of Hebrews* [Ephesians 4 Group software], p. 977), "The trial was not as severe as it could have been. It was not as severe as I deserve. And, my Savior suffered far worse for me." And so faith submits to the Father's discipline, trusting that He administers it perfectly for His eternal purpose and for my eternal good.

3. We should submit to the Father's discipline because although it is difficult for the present, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to all that are trained by it (12:11).

The author makes three points in verse 11:

- A. All discipline seems difficult for the present.

Discipline *seems*—to our limited, time-bound perspective—to be joyful, but sorrowful. I am glad that the Bible acknowledges that fact! God's discipline is *not* easy or pleasant. It is not wrong to cry out loudly to God or to weep when you're going through a dif-

ficult trial, because Jesus did that very thing (Heb. 5:7). The psalms show us that it is okay to bare our sorrows and grief to the Lord, as long as we do it with a submissive spirit. God gave us tear ducts for a reason!

I've shared with you before that on my 36th birthday, I had to conduct a funeral for a 39-year-old man who died of cancer, leaving a widow and two children. Two years later, I conducted the funeral for his wife, who also died of cancer. But after his funeral, as I was consoling his wife, her former pastor bounded up with a silly grin on his face and said, "Praise the Lord, Scott's in glory now!" I felt like punching him! I thought, "Let her weep!"

But, how does weeping fit with the Bible's command, "Rejoice always" (1 Thess. 5:16)? That command does not mean that we always go around with a smile on our face, saying, "Praise the Lord," even when we're hurting. It does not mean saying that you feel great when you don't, which is hypocrisy. Even Jesus admitted, "My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death" (Mark 14:34). It's not a contradiction that the shortest verse in the Greek New Testament is, "Rejoice always," whereas the shortest verse in the English New Testament is, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35)!

The key is, in the midst of the trials and the tears, to focus on the goal: the peaceful fruit of righteousness. If we keep in mind what God is doing in light of eternity, then we can endure with inner joy and peace, while at the same time admitting the pain and sorrow. As Paul wrote (2 Cor. 6:10), though we are sorrowful, we are yet always rejoicing, knowing that God is for us and that He is working all our trials together for our good (Rom. 8:28-36).

B. All discipline is designed to produce the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

The phrase means, "the peaceful fruit that *consists in* righteousness." "Righteousness" (12:11) is synonymous with "holiness" (12:10). Both terms mean godliness or conformity to Jesus Christ, who is the embodiment of godliness (Rom. 8:29). He shows us what it means to be a righteous person in thought, word, and deed. True holiness or righteousness is not just external, but begins at the heart or thought level. A truly righteous person has godly motives. He seeks to glorify God in everything.

Righteousness and peace always go together. You cannot have *true* righteousness without peace, or *true* peace without righteousness. I emphasize *true* because sometimes people mistake relief from trials as God's peace, even though they disobeyed God to gain that relief. A Christian brother once told me, with a peaceful smile on his face, that God had told him to divorce his wife, and that he felt such a peace in his heart since he made that decision! It took me several hours to convince him that he was *not* feeling God's peace, because his decision was *not* righteous. He was only feeling relief at the thought of getting away from a woman who, I admit, was not pleasant to live with!

God's discipline produces the peaceful fruit of righteousness in many ways. Here are seven:

- (1) God's discipline produces the peaceful fruit of righteousness by teaching us the terrible devastation caused by sin.

When David sinned with Bathsheba and murdered her husband, the Lord forgave his sin, but He also took the life of the son that they conceived. Also, the Lord raised up evil against David from within his own household (2 Sam. 12:11). His son Amnon raped his half-sister, Tamar. Tamar's brother, Absalom, murdered Amnon and later led a rebellion against David. By letting us suffer such painful consequences for our sin, God teaches us that sin causes devastation and death, so that we will flee from it when we are tempted.

- (2) God's discipline produces the peaceful fruit of righteousness by stripping us of self-righteousness, self-sufficiency, and pride.

By nature, we all have the tendency to think, "*Others* may commit terrible sins, but *I* could never do such a thing!" Peter thought that the other apostles might deny Jesus, but not trustworthy old Peter (Mark 14:29-30)! The Lord had to show Peter that his heart was just as prone to sin as everyone else's heart

The Lord burdened Paul excessively, beyond his strength, so that he despaired even of life. The reason, Paul said, was "so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:8-9).

We're all prone to trust in ourselves, rather than in the Lord. It is wise to have a prudent savings plan, but if we *trust* in our savings, God has ways of wiping out our accounts. It is wise to eat well and to exercise regularly, but if we're *trusting* in those things to preserve our lives, God has ways of bringing sickness or injury to teach us that we depend on Him for our next breath and for every day's supply of food and water.

- (3) God's discipline produces the peaceful fruit of righteousness by helping us shift our focus from this life to eternity.

By nature, we're all too focused on this life, in spite of the fact that life is a vapor (James 4:14). Paul says that the obvious fact (which we all try to ignore!) that our bodies are wearing out should make us shift our focus to eternity. He wrote, "though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day." He goes on to say that we look at the unseen, eternal things, not at the things we see on this earth (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

- (4) God's discipline produces the peaceful fruit of righteousness by uncovering hidden sins and blind spots.

Sometimes we are unaware of our sins or shortcomings until God brings some trial that exposes them. The psalmist testified, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word" (Ps. 119:67). There is no indication that he was openly rebellious before he was afflicted. Rather, the affliction made him aware of hidden sins that he had not seen before.

Paul had an amazing vision of heaven. Although he was a humble man, the danger was that this vision would puff him up with pride. So the Lord sent a messenger of Satan, a thorn in the flesh, to keep Paul from exalting himself (2 Cor. 12:7). Whatever that thorn was (some think a physical ailment; others think that it was the Judaizers, who plagued his ministry), it kept Paul from falling into the sin of pride over his heavenly vision.

- (5) God's discipline produces the peaceful fruit of righteousness by strengthening our faith and driving us closer to Christ.

Through his thorn in the flesh, Paul learned to trust Christ in ways that he had not done before. He learned the sufficiency of

God's grace and strength in the face of his painful weaknesses (2 Cor. 12:9-10). Adversity has a way of causing us to lean on the Lord in ways that we don't need to when times are trouble-free.

- (6) God's discipline produces the peaceful fruit of righteousness by developing compassion and humility.

Sometimes we look down on others who are suffering. We arrogantly think, "If they would just get it together [like *me!*], they would avoid all these problems!" Then God sends affliction to us. Suddenly, we have more compassion for those who suffer. We lose our proud judgmental spirit and grow in sympathy.

- (7) God's discipline produces the peaceful fruit of righteousness by developing the fruit of the Spirit in us and thus making us more usable in His service.

Fruit grows best on vines that are pruned (John 15:2). The fruit of the Spirit grows in hearts that have submitted to the pruning of God's discipline. The fact that righteousness is a *fruit* shows that it takes time to grow. We have instant coffee and instant photocopies and instant just about anything. But so far, no one has come up with instant fruit! It grows slowly but surely in our lives as we submit to God's discipline.

Thus, all discipline seems difficult for the moment, but it is designed to produce the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Finally,

- C. For discipline to be effective, we must submit to the training process.

To benefit by God's discipline, we must be "trained" by it. The Greek word (*gymnazo*; we get *gymnasium* from it) indicates physical training or exercise. It meant, literally, to strip naked. There were two images behind the word. First, as we have seen (12:1), an athlete has to strip himself of all needless weights or encumbrances that would hinder him from running well.

Also, the ancient Greeks, like modern Americans, were enamored by the perfect body. An athlete would strip before his trainer, who would determine which muscles the athlete needed to develop. The trainer would develop a regimen for the athlete to build up the muscles that were lacking, to perfect his physique. But, of

course, the athlete then had to submit to the training regimen to benefit from it.

God is the perfect spiritual trainer. He knows where each of us is lacking and what we need to develop the spiritual muscle to run well. But we have to submit to the program that He prescribes for us. If we dodge the training, we will pay later by being defeated by temptation and sin.

Conclusion

Maybe you're wondering, "If all trials are God's discipline, designed to make us holy, is it wrong to seek to get out from under them? Is it wrong to go to the doctor when we're ill? Is it wrong to try to get a better job? Is it wrong to try to resolve problems that irritate us? Why not just submit to them, if they are designed for our good?"

The answer is, it depends on our attitude toward the Lord in the trial. Is my heart in submission to the heavenly Father? Am I relating each trial to His providential love for me, trying to learn the lessons that He intends? Am I willing to accept His will if it does not coincide with my will?

As you know, Jesus in the Garden, prayed, "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Three times Paul asked God to remove his thorn in the flesh, but when God told Paul that His grace was sufficient, Paul was content to live with the distress (2 Cor. 12:8-10).

David was wrong to go into battle against Israel with the Philistine king. God allowed the Amalekites to raid the city where the families of David and his men lived, to burn it to the ground, and to take all of their wives and children captive. Even David's men threatened to stone him. "But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God." We see his submission to God's discipline in that he did not assume that he should go after the enemy and recover his family and possessions. Rather, he asked God whether he should pursue them. Only after the Lord granted permission did David go after them and recover everything (see 1 Sam. 30:1-8).

So in every trial, whether major or minor, stop and examine your heart. Are you truly in submission to God? Are you seeking to learn and grow in holiness through the trial? If so, it is not wrong

to ask the Father to remove it, if it's His will, and to take steps to resolve the problem. Often, In His grace and love, He will remove it. But, sometimes, He says, "My grace is sufficient for you." When He does, we have to trust that He is our loving Father who has our good in view. If we submit to Him, He will produce the peaceful fruit of righteousness in us.

Discussion Questions

1. How can we know whether it is God's will for us to endure a trial or if it is okay to seek to get out from under the trial?
2. Clearly, it is wrong to grumble (Phil. 2:14), but is there a proper way to express our complaints to the Lord? How?
3. How can a person who had an abusive father learn to respect God's fatherly discipline, especially when it is severe?
4. How can a believer who struggles with a bad attitude develop a heart of *cheerful* submission to God?

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