

Redemptive Discipline

Hebrews 12:1-13

As we finish corporate worship today, I do so with a heavy heart because I'm burdened by the gravity of the text before us. As we sing, I think of a parade of names, some people I know personally and others from a distance who served the Lord earnestly and faithfully yet defaulted morally along the way.

In my younger years, I downplayed these incidents because I assumed that:

1. These people were probably not saved to begin with, or
2. One day they intentionally chose to walk away from Christ and His ways

As I've grown a little bit older, I've recognized that these are not the "bad" people that I assumed they were. I'm convinced that many of them loved the Lord, and served Christ's bride vigorously. But as these situations pile up around us—especially with Christian leaders—I think it is important for us to reexamine some basics of the Christian faith because something is broken.

(Opening Illustration)

This text reminds me of a time when I was putting up a garage door opener (for the first time). A friend of mine, who was also clueless, offered to help me with this process. This arrangement worked out well because I needed to have a person reading me the directions step by step.

After getting some confidence I tried to jump ahead to what I thought was next, but my buddy had to correct me because I was not working according to the plan.

This is illustrative of the Christian life, is it not? My friend, who held the very words of the maker did his best, not to demean me, but to encourage me back to the plan that would get us to the Promised Land of a garage door that opens and shuts with the push of a button.

Although the issues of life are far more complex, this is an example of how our text prompts us to think about discipline. Discipline is often thought about as "kicking someone out of the church," "stern criticism," or "punishment," but this text let's us know that true discipline emerges from deep love and commitment.

The Call to Faithfulness (vs. 1-6)

(v. 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,

(Cloud of Witnesses)

One of the most important concepts to grasp when reading the Bible is that context is your best tool for understanding—if you don't understand something, keep reading, both before and after the text you're trying to understand!

Verse 1 begins with a “therefore,” so chapter twelve is continuing a thought from the previous verses. Chapter 11 is a virtual parade of the Old Testament “Greats.” It includes the stories of

- **Able:** the faithful son of Adam and Eve
- **Enoch:** who was taken up so that he would not see death
- **Abraham:** the great patriarch

When we arrive at verse 1 in chapter 12, we arrive at the fact that there is a “cloud of witnesses!” Just imagine, we are surrounded by:

- **Moses:** Who led God’s people out of Egypt. God’s people were pinned between Pharaoh’s army and the Red Sea, and the Lord did what he always did, he made a way—out of no way.
- We are also surrounded by **David:** Who stood up to the great Goliath knowing that God would fight his battles for him.
- We are surrounded by **Samson:** Who defended God’s people by slaying 1,000 Philistine soldiers with the jawbone of a donkey.

These are the examples of faith that we have surrounding us. Now that believers are surrounded by a “cloud of witnesses,” why are they surrounding us, and what are we supposed to do. The text gives us two things (v. 1):

1. ***lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and***
2. ***run with endurance the race that is set before us***

During the first century, runners entered the stadium with long flowing colorful robes, but at the start of the race, they would discard those robes and run hardly wearing any clothes. This scene would have been in the minds of the original readers and they’d understand that they’re being exhorted to discard anything that hinders them from running the race efficiently.

The author gets specific and insists that we ***“lay aside every...sin which clings so closely.”*** Suffice it to say, sin is like running the race of God’s mission with a parachute. It...

1. Complicates being directed by the Holy Spirit
2. Drives us away from God’s Word, and
3. Alienates us from God’s people

These hinderances make us unable to run the race the way the Lord intends for us. The word ***run*** here is simple to understand—it means to run continually—but it is hard to do.

I used to be a sprinter, and those races are easy, after the starting gun is fired, participants run as fast as you can for 100 or 200 meters. But a marathon—which is analogous to the Christian life—is a complex event and we need strategies to make it through. So, what is the strategy to run and endure faithfully?

(Verse 2)

Verse one instructs us to endure in the race, verse two is helps us do all that verse one sets before us. Now, those in the “hall of faith”—the “cloud of witnesses”—are not referenced so we can marvel at

what they've done. Nor are they mentioned because they are surrounding us as if we are running a race in a Colosseum and they are shouting your name (Walter, Walter...). Verse two lets us know that they are pointing us to Jesus—the one who endured. The text says...

(v. 2) 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.*

I find it intriguing that the text tells us to run continuously but our example to run continuously is of a man who sat down. Is that ironic to anyone else? Jesus is the *initiator* and the *perfecter* of faith, and that is why unlike the Old Testament priest who had to sacrifice and had to sacrifice and had to sacrifice (over and over again) he actually finished the job.

Jesus is the author, but he's also the perfecter, or sustainer of our faith. Jesus is not just the door we walk through to get into the house where the family of God dwells, but Jesus is the door, **and** the house. We **dwell** in him, we find our **existence**, in him, we find our **joy**, in him, we find our **hope**, and him. He is the *author* and the *sustainer*, the one who endured perfectly and finished the job.

Beloved, this is why we must stick close to Jesus, because he has done the impossible.

I'm glad today, that God does not judge me based upon my ability to run consistently, but he judges us based upon the merit of the one who ran perfectly, and because of his perfected running, he sat down! Jesus finished the job. When he was on the cross and he said, "it is finished," it was in fact, done.

I'm reminded of those Cameron Crazy's when I read these verses because those kids just never sit down. But after their team is victorious, after the win. They take their seats.

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

The author continues to reinforce the need to press into Jesus in an ongoing manner. For some of us, the idea of continuing to press into Jesus seems strange, but Jesus is not simply a set of facts to be mastered, or a puzzle to be put together and put to the side; he is a person, and through the different seasons of life the infinitely valuable person of Christ offers what you need to make it through.

(v. 4) 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?*

(Quoting Proverbs 3:11-12)

***My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reprov'd by him.***

***⁶For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives."***

Verses 7-11 are an Exposition of Proverbs 3:11-12

God's discipline combines the concepts of **training, instruction, guidance, reproof and correction.**

Correction, and discipline don't happen because we are abandoned by God—it is the reverse, it's because we are loved. Many of us hear the word discipline and it has a negative connotation, but v. 6 reminds us that ***“Those he loves he disciplines”*** and ***“he corrects everyone he accepts as his child.”***

I've learned a great deal about suffering and walking through trials from our Japanese brothers and sisters in recent years. Unlike many Westerners (and Americans in particular) who assume that the Savior is a means of avoiding trouble and suffering, rather, Jesus is the bruised reed and the bent nail who identifies *with* our sufferings and walks with us victoriously *in* them—giving us strength that we can endure because he endured the cross.

(vs. 7-8) The Necessity of discipline

⁷It 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? ⁸If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

Again, we see that discipline is not a negative, but a positive because it assumes that we are children of God.

I like the way the HCSB translates the first clause of verse 7 because it helps to demonstrate that the word “discipline” is used in a broader way than we are accustomed to using it. The HCSB says, ***“Endure suffering as discipline.”*** This wording established the link between suffering and restorative discipline. This is especially related to suffering that is circumstantial—not punitive. For example, when you get a terrible diagnosis, when a tragedy happens and life is lost, when a treasured relationship crumbles, ***“Endure suffering as discipline.”***

Although God did is not the causal agent for suffering, we have to understand that, in the midst of this kind of suffering, God can use it to forge something wonderful in us, but we have to let him as we ***“endure suffering as discipline.”***

There is a common goal of discipline and suffering in the language of the text because the result of both are the same; to be presented faithful and mature before God. The text is calling us to utilize *every* life circumstance to call us to faithfulness.

In fact, when I'm going through a trial, my prayer is that I would not waist the opportunity for God to work into my life, and if I'm honest, I pray that God will teach me whatever he wants to teach me, and fast, so the trial can pass, and that I won't waist an affliction and not learn anything from that suffering.

A significant question that arises from these two verses is, “Has your response to suffering/discipline demonstrated that you are a legitimate child of God?”

- Do difficult circumstances cause you to look to the One who endured suffering on the believer's behalf?
- Do you allow the Holy Spirit to correct your actions?
- Do you allow the Word of God to correct your desires when they are out of step with God's will?
- Have you been admonished/corrected by other believers and repented of your actions?

The great Reformer, Martin Luther said we are “Simultaneously just, yet a Sinner.” This means that because of Christ’s work on our behalf we are seen by God as righteous (if you’ve trusted in Him), but we are continually trying to act out our righteousness. As a result, discipline/correction is a normal part of the Christian life.

The following activities should characterize the Christian life as we are working out our faith as those prone to sin:

- We sin
- Corrected by the Holy Spirit
- Corrected by brothers and sisters
- Corrected by God’s word
- Being grieved over sin and acting in line with God’s plan and design

(vs. 9-10) Discipline from our Loving Father

⁹Besides 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? ¹⁰For 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.

These verses assume that, on the whole, earthly children respect and obey their fathers despite their shortcomings. With that said, how much more should you love and welcome the perfect discipline from your heavenly father?

As an aside, these verses highlight God’s design for parental authority as a foretaste of God’s discipline and loving correction for children. The idea is that a child, who is very literal in their understanding has their earthly parents as a visible example of authority, and as they learn that authority flows out of a parent’s love for them, they will be able to transfer their obedience to their loving and perfect heavenly father more easily.

(v. 11) The Benefits of Discipline

¹¹For 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.

The use of the agricultural metaphor is strategic here because the work that is required is often backbreaking as you plant and water, but when the harvest comes it’s a wonderful thing.

We must be about the work of cultivating a community that can correct us. The “cloud of witnesses” metaphor assumes a life lived in a community, not only the heroes of faith in the past, but also those in the present.

Theologically, image bearers of God are designed for community, and in the context of that community, discipline should be a regular occurrence. This is the first step to not ending up on a list of Christians who have morally defaulted.

Surround yourself with believers who you’ve let into your life and regularly invite them to correct you. This goes from the newest believers to the elders of the church. This is a normal part of life in the body.

Because we are sinners, if brotherly and sisterly correction is not happening, it does not mean that you are doing well in your walk with the Lord, it means that you have not pressed into a community enough for them to see your shortcomings, or you have not invited them enthusiastically enough to help correct your failings.

When I was in high school, someone who we considered a family friend, knocked me out with gas, took a knife, cut me open, and sewed the hole that he intentionally cut with thread. And we paid him thousands of dollars for it. It was a knee surgery. My friend dealt me a painful wound so I could heal up stronger than I was before the cut. In the same way, the fruit of righteousness is beneficial for those trained by it. While correction should be done gently, we will offer each other surgical-like cuts intended to strengthen each other for their own good and for the good of the body.

Some of us make this process harder than it needs to be... When someone comes to bring correction or a critique your way—especially someone who has demonstrated their love for you—be prepared to consider if there is any truth value to it. And assume that you've played some role in a complex and troubling situation. Even if it is a small part, seek repentance over it so that you can be right before the Lord and others.

(vs. 12-13) A Final Exhortation to Faithfulness

¹²Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.

Renew your commitment to complete the race and run it faithfully today. Completing the race requires the work of being strengthened by discipline, which assumes that you have a cloud of witnesses (both the historic examples of faith, and brothers and sisters today) to do the daily work of faithful living, namely, admonishing each other towards faithfulness.

Application: Types of Discipline

Formative Discipline

Proactively placing ourselves in places that form us into the likeness of Christ via sound biblical teaching, preaching, and exposing your life to others in the community.

Corrective Discipline

(internal correction) The Holy Spirit illumines our minds and hearts to the truth of God's word and continually aids us toward faithfulness.

(External correction) Matthew 18:15-17 is a helpful road map here. However, I think it is beneficial to highlight some points that will help each of us as we live out this requirement of living a disciplined life.

Step #1 (v. 15) = Admonishing a brother or sister alone

¹⁵"If your brother sins against you, go and rebuke him in private. If he listens to you, you have won your brother.

This type of correction should be the status quo (or the regular pattern) of God's people "iron sharpening iron" (Proverbs 27:17).

Friends encouraging each other to love one another well. Challenging each other's attitudes in sports, parenting, marriage, on the job, etc. Spouses encouraging each other to be patient and loving with their children. Prayerfully insisting to a brother or sister that their actions are not God's best for them.

All of this with the hope that they'll say, "you're right" and turn away from their sin or folly, because the point is not to deal a blow to hurt them via pointing out their shortcomings, but to restore them.

It is important to add that if you are not genuinely broken over your brother or sister's sin, you are not in the place to admonish them about it because the point is not to break them down. Unfortunately, restoration is not always the result. In this case, you continue to verse 16.

Step #2 (v. 16)

¹⁶But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Prayerfully bringing another party in is important because the two people who have witnessed the sin humble themselves together in preparation to confront their brother or sister. This needs to be done prayerfully and without commotion. This is not the moment when you ask for prayer in a large group because you are getting ready to confront so and so about this and that, because the goal is not to embarrass them, but to restore them to fellowship to Christ and to the body of believers.

When you talk with them, help the person understand what repentance looks like, and if they have a desire to pursue it, help them get there. And rejoice if regained if your brother or sister!

If they are not repentant, make it clear that you've come to them once individually and now you've come with another (according to Matthew 18). If there is no change after a time, then continue to verse 17.

Step #3 (v. 17a) Tell the Church

¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.

This is often the step that our minds rush to when discussing church discipline. The reality is that we should be practicing church discipline daily, but it begins with verse 15, not verse 17. The hope is that nobody will ever get to verse 17.

Without repentance the person should be removed from church membership because the church can no longer confirm their commitment to Christ as lord over their life.

Step #4 (v. 17b) (missional engagement)

And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

It's often assumed that treating someone like an unbeliever or tax collector means treating them like dirt and ostracizing them as second-class citizens.

Let me remind you that our Lord ate and dine with tax collectors and sinners. He ultimately died so that they might enter into the kingdom. In short, the church should be sharing the gospel with them because that is the only way that they will emerge victorious over the sin that so easily entangles them.

As I preach today I'm keenly aware that I'm inviting all kinds of loving scrutiny on my life, but by God's grace, it will be for my good, and if I respond in the spirit, not the flesh, I'll never end up on someone's list of those who have morally defaulted and brought shame to the name of Christ.

May this be true of us at Imago Dei Church, that we love our Lord enough to receive his discipline, that we love each other enough to extend loving correction to each other to allow this to be a community of believers that is flourishing and living righteously, and thus joyfully because we follow the wonderful statutes of our God.