

When God's Love Hurts  
Hebrews 12:1-17

There is a verse in Philippians 2, verse 13, that should bring great encouragement to the heart of every believer and every one who seeks God's favor and purpose in their lives, Inspired by the Holy Spirit to reveal the mind and heart and person and work of God Paul writes these words:

*For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*

It is God at work in us who gives us the desire and determination to follow through in faith and practice what pleases Him. **God works continuously in the lives of those who loves to bring them into conformity with His character and His will both for His glory and for our joy.** God works through His Spirit and His word and His redeemed people in the course and circumstances of our lives to bring us more completely every moment of every day into the living likeness of Jesus Christ. The ongoing work of God to mold His image in us is called divine discipline and discipline is a real world manifestation of God's love in our lives. But sometimes, love hurts. Last week we talked about disappointment with God. This morning we want to think about those inevitable moments when God's love hurts, when discipline produces pain, when the way forward leads through the valley of the shadow, when life is touched by sorrow and suffering.

Let me invite you to open your Bibles to the New Testament book of Hebrews, chapter 12. Hebrews is written to an audience with an impeccable grasp of the Old Testament. The goal of Hebrews is to convince the reader of the superiority of Jesus Christ and to affirm the reader's ongoing life of faith in Christ. Chapters 1-10 argue for the superiority of Christ and faith in Him alone. Chapter 11 encourages those who know Jesus with the stories and examples of those who lived by faith anticipating Jesus. Chapter 12 confronts us with the living reality of what it means in practical experience to follow Jesus and live the life of faith. If we will live by faith in Jesus Christ, as He deserves and as real joy demands, then we will face the gracious, loving work of divine discipline.

**Hebrews 12:1-17 (ESV) *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, 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. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.***

***In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."***

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

*Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. 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; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. 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.*

**God continuously disciplines those He loves to bring them into conformity with His character and will both for His glory and for their immediate and eternal joy.**

The word discipline here is the Greek word *paideia*. It means to bring up a child, or to train, and in this sense to discipline, to take all the steps necessary, guided by love, to successfully mold the character for their best benefit. In the case of a disciple, discipline is the loving work of God toward those whom He loves that shapes us toward holiness, even when it hurts.

But, before we go any further, it would be helpful to try and make a clear distinction between two ideas that are often used interchangeably and muddled. Let's clarify the difference between discipline and punishment. Many people today mistake God's work of discipline for God's just work of punishment, and they are not the same.

Punishment is about justice and its purpose is to create fear. The goal of punishment is corrected behavior through fear of consequences. Discipline is about love and its purpose is to create strength. The goal of discipline is transformed behavior through the expectation of greater joy. Divine discipline is God's gracious, instructive, and corrective measures He takes in our lives to bring our heart, mind, will, and conduct into conformity with Christ, a conformity characterized by personal holiness and eternal joy.

Punishment looks back at what we've done and exacts justice. Discipline looks forward to what God has for us to become and helps us get there. Punishment is about condemnation. Discipline is about correction. Punishment is about being fair. Discipline is about doing what is the most helpful. Punishment is about making the situation right. Discipline is about helping the person get right. Punishment flows from anger. Discipline flows from patience. Punishment is a response when the relationship is broken. Discipline is a response when a relationship is working towards restoration. Punishment is about taking. Discipline is about giving. Punishment is easy to

give but hard to get anything back from. Discipline is hard to give but easy to get benefits back from.

While God's discipline may often be experienced as hardship, this passage makes it clear that divine discipline is (1) a responsibility God fulfills as a parent toward those who are His true children, (2) expresses love and not anger, and (3) is directed toward a specific purpose, to shape us toward holiness.

Christian, loss and grief and pain and sorrow flow in our lives at the hand and will of our loving heavenly Father who disciplines us in order to perfect holiness in us, to make us into the moral, spiritual, and personal likeness of God's beloved Son, Jesus. **God continuously works in the lives of those He loves to bring them into conformity with His character and will both for His glory and our eternal joy, even when it hurts.**

Let's look briefly at the principles of divine discipline that are included here in Hebrews 12:1-17.

First, **the goal of God's discipline in our lives is victory (12:1-2)**. Here the author uses the picture of a race to describe the life of faith. The point of any race is victory. Now, I don't necessarily mean winning in the sense of coming in first place. I mean victory as in accomplishing the purpose of running. Some people engage in sports competitions to win first prize. For others, victory comes in achieving a personal best, marking an improvement in performance. Others find sheer joy in surmounting the obstacle the race presents. If you just love to run, then running will be your victory.

The victory of the life race of faith is eternal joy as a result of faithful trust in and obedience to our Father's will for us. We focus our eyes on Jesus as we run this race. We focus on the One who ran His own race for the sake of loving the Father, exalting the Father's glory, obeying and pleasing the Father, and embracing the Father's plan. The Father's glory was the Son's joy-filled goal and He pressed on for that victory, even through the hurt. The goal of God's discipline in the lives of those He loves is the victory of eternal joy in the presence of His soul-satisfying, life-giving, eternity-filling glory.

The goal of divine discipline in our lives is victory. **The context of divine discipline is our struggle against sin (12:3-4)**. The sin against which we struggle is both internal and external. We struggle against the effect of the sinful nature that remains in us after we are born again AND we struggle against the effect of unrestrained sin in the lives of others.

The apostle Paul testified in Romans 7:

**Romans 7:19-20 (ESV) *For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.***

**Romans 7:22-23 (ESV) *For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I***

*see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.*

That nature that wars within us is the focus of God's merciful and loving, life-changing, heart-molding, holiness-producing discipline. Holiness is a state of moral and spiritual conformity with the character of God. Sin defies holiness. Discipline produces holiness in those who are trained by it, even when it hurts.

And let me assure you from His own self-revelation, **the motive of divine discipline is love (12:5-6)**. The ancient world understood the role of a father in the life of a child as the role of discipline, character formation. It was generally understood that a father who loved his children disciplined them. He assumed as an act of love for his children the difficult task of forming their character. Here is the statement of God's love in your discipline:

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

We become the sons of God, the children of God, through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit accompanied by faith in Jesus Christ. Through faith in Christ we are adopted as sons of God. Through Christ, and through faith in Him alone, God brings those who were sons of the world, sons of the flesh, sons of the devil, not only into fellowship with God but into God's family as beloved children, where **God continuously works in the lives of those He loves to bring them into conformity with His character and will both for His glory and our eternal joy, even when it hurts.**

Victory is the goal of divine discipline. The struggle against sin is the context of divine discipline. Love is the motive for discipline. And **"sons" are the focus of discipline (12:5-6)**. The principle here focuses on the fact that God disciplines those whom He has through Christ drawn into a real and living relationship with Himself. We have many reasons to rejoice when God works His divine discipline in our lives. One of the dearest is that discipline demonstrates we belong to Him, we are His children, His sons and daughters bought by the blood of Christ and adopted through faith in Him. We are His, legitimately, rightly, eternally God's.

The fifth principle of divine discipleship is that **the Applicator of divine discipleship is our Creator (12:9-10)**. God does not send some spiritual nanny to bully us into conformity. He comes Himself. He loves us with His own heart, His own mind, his own will, His own character and intent and will and purpose. Our earthly dads, the ones who loved us, did the best they could given their limitations, and we respect them for their efforts. God does the best He can do, and it is the best. His love and power and wisdom have no limitation, no bounds. He never has to guess at the outcomes of His loving interactions with us. He knows exactly what He is doing, what we will do, and what both the immediate and long term effects will be.

Finally, this morning, **the benefit of divine discipline is Christ-likeness (12:11)**. It is just like God to use hardship, difficulty, pain, sorrow, and hurt as tools to perfect His children, since that is exactly what He did with His one and only Son, Jesus.

**Hebrews 2:10 (ESV)** *For it was fitting that he [God], for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory [us], should make the founder of their salvation [Jesus] perfect through suffering [discipline].*

**Hebrews 5:8-9 (ESV)** *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,*

**Hebrews 10:1 (ESV)** *For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.*

**Hebrews 10:14 (ESV)** *For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*

God uses discipline, even when painful and unpleasant to perfect us, to accomplish within us His goal of sharing His character, His holiness with us by producing His holiness in us. **God continuously works in the lives of those He loves to bring them into conformity with His character and will both for His glory and our eternal joy, even when it hurts.**

How should we respond to God's discipline? Let me give you three admonitions to think about. First, **change your attitude toward your hurt** and be encouraged at the work of God in your life. The author puts it this way:

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

Don't drag around in despair, the epitome of gloom and doom. Yes, discipline hurts. But the pain has purpose and the joy that comes from discipline outweighs the pain that comes with discipline.

Second, **reach out to others and to God.**

**Hebrews 12:14 (ESV)** *Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.*

This is one of those occasions when I am grateful for Philippians 2:13, "For it is God who works in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure." There are some contexts where I am very, very thankful that it is God who gives me both the want to and the will to when it comes to faith and obedience. Striving for peace with others includes reaching out to them for comfort and help when it is needed. And holiness only comes from God. If we are going to strive for holiness then we are going to have to ask God for it, get on our knees and seek His face and agree with Him and ask Him to accomplish His purpose in our pain.

Lastly, set boundaries against despair.

**Hebrews 12:15-16 (ESV) *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; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.***

We have to help one another keep bitterness at bay. We have to love one another, care for one another, be present for one another, bear the burden of pain and sorrow and hurt for one another. We cannot isolate against our brothers and sisters but must isolate our brothers and sisters and ourselves from despair and the bitterness produced by sinful hearts. Bitterness is produced in stricken hearts blinded to love. We must present the love and grace of God to one another as God disciplines us. We must treasure and cherish and love those whom God loves.

And again, I am thankful for the work of God who accomplishes these things in and through us. Remember, divine discipline is **God continuously working in the lives of those He loves to bring them into conformity with His character and will both for His glory and our eternal joy, even when it hurts.**