

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Hebrews 12:4 - 24 (NIV)

⁴In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “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.” ⁷Endure 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. ⁹Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! ¹⁰Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. ¹²Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ¹³“Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. ¹⁴Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. ¹⁶See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. ¹⁷Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears. ¹⁸You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.” ²¹The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.” ²²But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, ²⁴to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Theme: God’s Discipline Is Hard, but It’s a Blessing”

It’s that time of year when school is about to start again. Two of my kids start already this week. The other one has already had sports’ practice for a couple of weeks. If you have ever played sports, you know that these first few weeks of practice are the most difficult. You are a little out of shape or you are using muscles for that sport that you don’t use for other things. Those first summer practices are miserable. It is hot and humid. There are a lot of mosquitos, and you come home feeling very sore. There are some days when you wonder whether it is worth it. Maybe you should just quit.

But those days of training are very important. They get you in shape so that you won’t get injured. They help you to get faster and improve your game. Not everyone is like a famous quarterback who can begin the season with little practice. We need that training and discipline to compete well.

In these verses Paul compares our Christian life to that kind of discipline. He says that the Lord’s discipline is never pleasant. In our Gospel lesson Jesus says that our faith is agonizing. It’s not easy,

but God's discipline is also a blessing because it brings the fruits of righteousness and peace into our lives.

I. God's discipline is hard.

The discipline that God talks about here is hardship. (Vs 7) For the readers of this letter it was persecution. They had been persecuted for their faith, but it was not yet to the point that their blood was shed. However, there were already several Christians, who had given their life for their faith. There are many Christians today who live under persecution. It is not safe for them to confess Jesus Christ as their Savior. There are even some who live out our Lord's command to love another as the doctors in Afghanistan did a few weeks ago, who were killed for doing good. It is increasingly becoming difficult for us today to confess Christ. Jesus says in our Gospel lesson that the door is narrow that leads to eternal life. He is the only way. Yet, our world today wants to hear that the door is wide, and that every belief will give eternal life. But there is only one Savior who gave His life for us and rose from the dead. Any other way is false. That is something that our world doesn't want to accept today.

There are also other hardships that we bear. They might be sickness, the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job. It could be some financial situation that we are going through. It might be a weakness that we have. We all have something that we can't do well. It might simply be that our age catching up with us, as in the case of that quarterback that I mentioned before. It might be a bad situation that we got ourselves into by our own doing. We got ourselves in this mess. We all have times of hardship. No one that God loves is spared those times. He allows times of hardship to come to all of His people.

Those times are not pleasant. In fact, they hurt a lot. Our text says, "*No discipline seems pleasant at the time.*" When I minister to people who are sick, hurting or grieving, it is never an easy time for them. No one ever says that they are so thankful that this happened to them. At such times we often wonder how we are going to make it or what will be next? We know that God promises that He will never give us more than we can bear, but we wish that He wouldn't think that we can bear so much. Our suffering and hurt are so bad, that we almost can't even imagine what like would be like without the suffering. We feel like Jacob when he fled from his brother and spent the first night in Bethel or Joseph after his brothers threw him in a pit and then sold him as a slave. These are tremendously difficult times in our lives. We all have them. Some of you are probably going through them right now. They are like when you are in the dentist chair. You just want it to be over right now.

II. But in the end those times are always blessings.

It says that they bear the fruits of peace and righteousness. Those times teach us that God is always faithful. It is especially at those times that His Word provides comfort. We remember some of those precious Bible verses such as Romans 8:28 that all things work for the good of those who love God. We find a special peace when we receive our Lord's Supper. We learn just how precious our Lord's Word and Sacraments are. It is as such times that our hearts go out to the Lord in prayer. We might cry out in despair. We might even complain to God. While we are often tempted to forget God when things are going well. These are the times in our lives when we lean on God and depend on Him. God often saves us in such times in a way that we never expected. He shows us His power for all

who believe in Him. That first night after he fled from his brother, Jacob saw a vision and God promised him that He would go with him. Joseph spent many years as a slave and in prison, but God was with him during all of his trials, and when the time was right, he became God's chosen servant to save His people. When the need is the greatest, God is nearest. Those times teach us that God will never leave us or forsake us.

They fill our hearts with peace and righteousness. They teach us the peace that passes all understanding. That is the confidence that God will never leave us or forsake us. He will always be there for us in every situation. They also fill our hearts with righteousness. They show us how weak we are. They remind us how sinful we are and that our greatest treasures are not on this earth. They teach us that our righteousness is not in ourselves, but in Christ. He forgives our sins and is leading us to the home of righteousness, His everlasting glory in heaven. They help us to fix our eyes on Jesus, to see Him as our Savior and to look forward to our everlasting life with Him in heaven. They put our hearts and minds on the finish line.

III. They also help us to run our Christian race with perseverance.

The writer to the Hebrews lists several examples in these verses. In verse 14 he writes to strive to live in peace with everyone, and in verse 16 it says to see to it that no bitterness springs up. It is easy to become bitter and vengeful toward our enemies, but these times teach us to be forgiving and to love our enemies. In the latter part of verse 14 and verse 15 it says to strive for the holiness without which no one will see God and to see to it that we obtain the grace of God. These times teach us that our righteousness in Christ is the greatest treasure that we have because it will last forever. Finally it says that we see to it that we are not sexually immoral or godless. It is tempting to be like Esau. We were raised in the faith. We should have known better, but we let our sinful passions get the best of us. These times have taught us to keep those passions in check, and to live as God's holy people.

These times of God's discipline could be compared to several things: sports conditioning, a needed operation or physical therapy after the operation. They are not pleasant. In fact, they hurt a lot. That's how God's discipline is for us. It hurts. These are the most devastating times of our lives, but God uses them to train us in righteousness and peace. In the end they are some of the most fruitful parts of our lives because they teach us to rely on God and His grace and power for all who believe in Him.

If you are going through one of those periods right now, strengthen those feeble arms and weak knees as you look to Christ. If you are going through a time of refreshing right now, don't forget how God helped you through those troubling times of your life. The Lord's discipline is always hard, but it is always a blessing. May God give each of us that confidence and peace during those difficult times that God sends our way. Amen.

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