

"Punishment or Discipline?"

Hebrews 12:4-11

August 22, 2010

13th Sunday After Pentecost

There's an old story about a father preparing to spank his son because the son did something wrong. The son doesn't want the spanking so the father tries to ease the pain. The father says, "You know, son, this is going to hurt me a lot more than it's going to hurt you." The son replies, "Well, dad, if that's the case and you really want to punish me, let me spank you."

We obviously have two different perspectives on what is going on here. The son's perspective is that a spanking is only a punishment to hurt him. The father's perspective is that a spanking is discipline, administered reluctantly, to help him. Although this is an old joke, it might give us some new insights in understanding the origin and meaning of the suffering which we often have to endure. Understanding suffering all boils down to differing perspectives – one held by us and another held by our Heavenly Father.

Our society has come to believe that we should be free from suffering and that suffering is always a bad thing. Some in the church believe that suffering is never God's will and results because of a lack of faith. Therefore, when something bad happens in our lives – a serious disease, a financial predicament, the loss of a loved one, and so on – our natural reaction is to ask, "Why?" "Why me, Lord?" The same may happen with natural disasters – the devastation wrought by a hurricane, a tornado, a flood, or a fire. "Why? Why me, Lord?" These reactions may have a tone of pride: "Why are you doing this to me, Lord?" (implying I don't deserve this.) Or, often the reaction may have a tone of guilt: "What have I done to deserve this, Lord? Why are you punishing me?" We then begin searching our souls, as an individual or as a nation, to find what horrible sin has brought such horrible suffering upon us.

It certainly could be argued that we deserve such punishment, although it might be hard to accept. We live in an age where everything from personal tastes to morality is relative. One's best effort at doing something is often emphasized as being more important than doing it right or well.

But our God is holy. This means that God deals in moral absolutes and perfection. To say that God is holy is to say more than God is perfect and that He Himself is free from error and sin. It means that He has established absolute standards of being and morality for His creation. It means that He cannot and will not permit sin in His presence because of His holiness. He will punish and destroy all sin and evil.

The Word of God declares that we – all of humanity – have fallen short of God's standards. We are born sinful in our being, having inherited this like a deadly disease from our first parents. We have compounded the problem with our behavior. As much as we try to ignore, justify, or relativize our behavior to make it acceptable to the world and to ourselves, God's Law declares and our conscience testifies that we have broken God's standards and sinned. We have both accidentally and intentionally done that which is wrong and evil. Even more than that, we have both accidentally and intentionally failed to do good. In other words, we have done the evil which God forbids and we have not done the good which God requires.

As a result, God's anger is stirred up against us and His judgment is upon us. The sin which we have done in thought, word, and deed deserves punishment. As we say in our confession of sins in the liturgy, "We justly deserve Your present and eternal punishment." There is no doubt. Sin results in punishment from a holy God and punishment is deserved by a sinful humanity.

So, then, we, as sinful human beings, *are* being punished by God when bad things happen, eh? There is good news. The fact that we are deserving of punishment before a holy God does not mean that we will receive that punishment. Our merciful Lord has sent Someone – His only Son, Jesus Christ – to bear our sin and accept our punishment in our place. In that way, He could be merciful to us while, at the same time, being true to His holiness.

We know the story well. Jesus died on the cross. He took the punishment for our sins. Thus God forgives us for Jesus' sake. But there's one aspect of this narrative which we either fail to understand or underestimate the importance of. Right before Jesus died, He said, "It is finished!" (John 19:30) What did he mean here? He certainly did not mean that His life was over. He meant that the punishment for sin was over. The price was paid. All was fulfilled in Christ.

This is crucial! If the price was paid in full at Calvary and if all of God's punishment for sin was inflicted on Jesus, then how could we possibly get the idea that God is punishing us for some wrongs we have done when anything bad happens in our lives? Do we think that Jesus was punished for sin up until that time and that there is additional punishment for sins committed after that time? That's simply not true. Anything sinful that we do now has already been punished in Jesus on the cross at Calvary.

Paul writes in the book of Romans, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 8:1). Did you catch that? God is no longer angry with you because of your sin. His anger has already been poured out in full and has been appeased by the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. God looks at you through Jesus Christ with only love. He does not punish you because of your sin. He declares you to be holy in His sight because of Jesus.

What, then, about the suffering we endure? If it is not punishment from God, then what is it? Is Satan in control? No, God is almighty. Nothing happens to us without Him causing it or allowing it. Is God mean? No, God is loving and merciful. Nothing happens to us as a result of God's vengeance or whim.

So, what *is* suffering? Too often, we are like the boy in our opening illustration. We see our suffering only as punishment which God does or allows to hurt us in the short term. Our text gives us a different perspective. Suffering is discipline which our Heavenly Father does or allows in order to help us in the long term.

Disciplining is hard. If you are a parent who has raised children, you know that to be true. It's much easier to make children happy and not to restrict their freedom and self-expression with rules and consequences. We've all seen children run amok who have been raised in that environment. It takes much more work (some call it "tough love") to discipline children by limiting what they get and restricting their freedom. These things are unpleasant, but disciplined children often turn out better. So, discipline is a sign of true love. While it is unpleasant for a short time, in the long run it produces good things.

The same is true when our Heavenly Father disciplines us through various kinds of suffering. Imagine if God gave us everything we wanted and imposed no law to regulate our behavior. Would that make us truly happy? No! That would be chaos. We would wander away from Him, rather than toward Him. We would miss the narrow door of which Jesus speaks and end up in hell, rather than heaven.

But God loves us enough to do the unpleasant job of disciplining us. The author to the Hebrews quotes the Old Testament in saying, "The Lord disciplines the ones he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." Suffering is not a sign of God's hatred toward us and abandonment of us. It's just the opposite. Suffering is discipline which is a sign of God's love for us and His acceptance of us as sons and daughters.

The author compares it to our earthly fathers. When our fathers here disciplined us here, it was not pleasant or enjoyable. Later on we came to respect them, understand the reason for that discipline, and see how that discipline was for our own good. For example, when we got our first job and our parents made us budget our money – some for the Lord in an offering, some for spending on our own, and some for savings for the future, we may have thought how much we were suffering. We didn't want to be limited. We wanted to spend it all. Yet, when we became older and had the skill and discipline of budgeting money, we were grateful to our parents for teaching that and respected them for doing it.

Sometimes, it's hard to see how real suffering is very helpful. The author of the Book of Hebrews says, "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." Looking past immediate gratification to a future reward is very difficult in an age which emphasizes immediate gratification. Yet some already do that. For example, athletes adhere to a strict diet, give up certain freedoms, and accept the pain of training in order to get college scholarships or become professional athletes.

In our lives with God, it is the same thing. We must, at times, experience something bad or give up something good at the present time in order to get something better in the future. Suffering may help us see our sin and repent. For instance, when you wake up with a hangover from being drunk or catch an STD from promiscuous sex, such suffering can bring the Law of God crashing down upon you in a way that might not have happened if you hadn't suffered. This leads to repentance and forgiveness.

Suffering may help draw our attention to God when we have forgotten Him. When everything is going well, we tend to forget about God. Often, through disasters, either personal or corporate, we turn our attention back to God. For example, remember how churches filled on September 11, 2001 and the days following the terrorist attacks. Although, for many it was short lived, this national suffering led people to seek God and His help.

Suffering may help us trust in God and live, rather than trust ourselves and perish. With our technology and quality of life, we may think ourselves to be self-sufficient and not in need of God. This can bring disastrous results like the farmer in our Gospel reading a few weeks ago who felt that and to whom God said, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (Luke 12:20) A financial setback or a health problem can cause us to turn to God and trust His mercy.

Suffering can give us hope, rather than despair or indifference. Again, as every day life goes back, we may not think much about eternity to the point where we are not ready to face it. But the

death of a loved one or the signs of our approaching mortality help us to focus our attention on eternal life, rather than this mundane life on earth, and trust in our Lord Jesus Christ to get us there.

The list could go on and on. The suffering which is not pleasant now is God's way of disciplining us so that we might obtain some fruit of righteousness in the future. Rather than saying, "Why me, Lord?" when some suffering hits (which only causes anger and bitterness), try saying, "What do you want me to learn, Lord?" when that suffering comes. This attitude can bring about joy and hope.

We are thus freed from the pressure of answering the question "Punishment or Discipline?" when suffering comes. No matter what the circumstance, for those of us in Christ Jesus, it is never punishment for something we've done. That has been taken care of in full by Jesus on Calvary. It is always discipline. It is sign of God's love and His acceptance of us as His children. It is painful and unpleasant now, but later yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness which will endure forever. Do not complain about the discipline of the Lord, remain the same, and die. Learn from His discipline, be transformed, and live. Amen.