

## Lesson 5 Handout – Discipline As Referenced in Hebrews 12:5-13

**12:5. Do not lightly regard/distain the discipline of the Lord.** God’s fatherly discipline, painful though it sometimes is, transforms us into faithful, obedient sons and daughters. The Old Testament testifies to this reality, as the author reminds his audience: *You have also forgotten the exhortation addressed to you as sons* (12:5). The passage he is about to quote, Proverbs 3:11–12, is a word of “exhortation” or “encouragement” (*paraklēsis*), like the Letter to the Hebrews itself (13:22). Like other biblical texts, it is a living word in which God addresses us in the present. *My son, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when reproved by him.* This proverb cautions against two wrong responses to God’s “discipline” (*paideia*, which can mean, more broadly, “training” or “education”). The **first**, to “lightly regard/disdain,” is exemplified by a child who laughs off correction without any intention of changing his or her behavior. The **second**, to “lose courage/heart,” is exemplified by a child who becomes dejected and discouraged at correction. It is the latter to which the readers of Hebrews are tempted, as the same verb “lose heart” in verse 3 shows. But in either case, one misses out on the educational value of the discipline.

The proverb continues by giving the reason we should highly value our sufferings: because they are a sign of God’s love for us. *For whom the Lord loves, he disciplines; he scourges every son he acknowledges.* God allows suffering because he deeply cares about his children growing to full maturity. The people of Israel had to learn to understand suffering in this light. Moses had said of their hunger and other hardships during the forty years in the desert, “You must know in your heart that, even as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord, your God, disciplines you” (Deut 8:5). The psalmist confesses to God that he sees how his sufferings changed him: “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I hold to your promise” (Ps 119:67); “It was good for me to be afflicted, in order to learn your statutes” (Ps 119:71). For the same

reason the book of Proverbs repeatedly admonishes parents not to neglect disciplining their children: “He who spares the rod hates his son, / but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him” (Prov 13:24 RSV).

This is how, then, we should regard the troubles that come from Christian witness in a hostile world, and any other sufferings: *Endure your trials as “discipline.”* They are signs that **God** is treating us as his children. This analogy does not mean that God is simply treating us the same way a human father treats his children; rather, God is treating us as *his own* sons and daughters. The analogy moves not upward but downward: it is not that God acts like human fathers, whose conduct often falls far short, but that wise, firm, and loving fathers give us a glimpse of what God is like. God uses all the adverse events in our lives to “perfect” us—to prepare us for the unimaginable glory of divine life—as Jesus himself, the firstborn Son, was “made perfect through suffering” (2:10; see 12:23).

**For what “son” is there whom his father does not discipline?** (12:7) The implied answer is “none.” In the ancient world the education of sons, preparing them for full participation in the life of society, was considered a paramount duty of fathers. If adolescents were observed growing up without parental discipline, one would assume they were **not** legal **sons** but illegitimate children who, in ancient society, had no rights of inheritance. Therefore, the author reasons, we would have grounds to be concerned only if we were without discipline! But God, the infinitely wise Father, does not leave any of his children without the correction that brings us to spiritual maturity. All have shared in these lessons of sonship, including the biblical heroes of chapter 11, Christian believers (10:32–34), and most of all, Jesus himself, the firstborn Son.

Hebrews 12:9 uses deploys the same kind of rabbinic argument used in 2:2 and 9:13–14, reasoning from the lesser to the greater (*qal wahomer*). If we respected our human parents, who disciplined us imperfectly, all the more

should we trustingly submit to our heavenly Father, who disciplines us with perfect wisdom and love. The Greek phrase for earthly fathers is literally “fathers of flesh.” God, in contrast, is the Father of spirits. This is an unusual title for God. Here it probably means that God is the source of our spiritual life, our capacity to relate to him, whereas our earthly parents are the source of only our natural life. If we submit to God’s discipline, as hard as it may seem at the time, we will live—that is, share in God’s own eternal life (see 7:16).

Contemporary society has something of an allergy to parental discipline. This is partly because some people have been hurt by parental discipline that was administered harshly or arbitrarily, or even abusively, motivated more by annoyance at the child’s behavior than by love. Such uncharitable discipline can leave deep wounds in the heart of a child, often leading to dysfunctional behavior as an adult. But many parents forget that the reverse is also true.

A child who does not receive consistent, loving discipline experiences a lack of appropriate boundaries, which causes insecurity. Such a child becomes a slave to his or her own selfish whims and grows up lacking in self-control, which in turn deprives him or her of the happiness that comes from relationships of self-sacrifice and self-giving love. Such a person is also unprepared to receive correction from other authorities or from God himself, and may misinterpret discipline as rejection. On the other hand, children who receive consistent and loving discipline from their parents are formed in character and, more importantly, are shown an image of their infinitely more wise and loving heavenly Father.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Healy, M. (2016). [\*Hebrews\*](#) (P. S. Williamson & M. Healy, Eds.; pp. 262–268). Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group.