

MOVING ON TO MATURITY

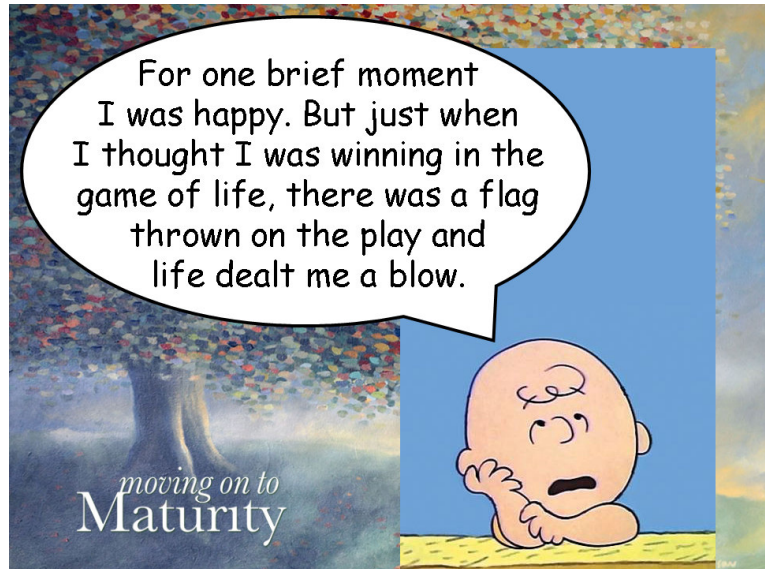
The Grade of Discipline

Hebrews 12:12-24

“There is a Redeemer, Jesus, God’s own son; Precious Lamb of God, Messiah, Holy one.” And He is there *for* you and me; to save, but also to heal.

Maybe you feel this morning like Marie in the skit that we just saw – bitter, bruised and hurt. Maybe you feel a little like this cartoon image of Charlie Brown pondering his plight in life.

But as believers, the blows dealt to us in life are under the wise, good control of an Almighty God. And he is working for our good. As we saw last week, that is the theme of Hebrews 12:4-11. We saw that difficulty must be seen through the lens of God’s loving discipline.



Pastor Reilly highlighted for us several facets of God’s discipline in our lives. If you’re like me, you probably remembered one statement that Reilly made: *When God disciplines us, it’s not to condemn us, but to correct us.* God cannot and will not condone sin in our lives. Therefore, he exercises fatherly discipline to correct us.

But God’s discipline in our lives is not always corrective. Sometimes it is preventative. That was the case with the Apostle Paul. Remember what Paul writes to the Corinthians?

To keep me from becoming conceited ...there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” 2 Corinthians 12:7-9

God’s discipline is corrective. God’s discipline is preventative. And all of God’s discipline is instructive. All of God’s discipline is for our good, to conform you and me more into the image of Jesus Christ. *This is the grace of discipline.*

But unfortunately, you and I can miss out on that grace. And that is the concern of the verses that we are looking at today. Turn with me to Hebrews 12:12-17.

¹² Therefore, 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. ¹⁴ Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble

and defile many. ¹⁶ See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. ¹⁷ Afterward, 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. Hebrews 12:12-17

God's grace shows up in the most unexpected places and times of our lives. God's grace tastes the sweetest in our difficulty. In our difficulty, the grief we experience is only a pathway to lead us into a greater measure of God's grace.

But here's the catch. We can "miss" God's grace. "See to it that no one misses the grace of God..." (Hebrews 12:15). Discipline is a demonstration of the grace of God in our lives. And that's probably why it's so easy for you and me to "miss" it. We prefer other demonstrations of God's grace...like daily provision, family and friends, and the promise of eternal life. Such things are more palatable to our taste. But discipline? No way! And so we can "miss" God's grace in the discipline. Literally, we can "come up short" of God's grace.¹ And when we do, it's not because God is not *giving* us his grace. It's because we are not *receiving* his grace.

In times of testing – or at any time for that matter – how do we avoid missing out on the grace of God? I believe the writer tells us earlier in this letter. He urges us in chapter 4, verses 14-16:

We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. *Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.* Hebrews 4:14-16

Simply put, we "miss" the grace of God by failing to turn to him in our time of need. And we embrace the grace of God by turning to him in our time of need. So this entire passage seems to turn on that one phrase: "*See to it that no one misses the grace of God...*" This is the "watershed" phrase of the passage. All that leads up to it leads to one result. All that follows it, leads to another result. When in our difficulty we embrace God's grace, the results are positive. When in our difficulty we miss God's grace, the results are negative.

I. WE CAN MISS GOD'S GRACE AND GROW BITTER (12:15-17).

A. Bitterness (15b)

Let's begin with the latter. We can miss God's grace and grow bitter.

See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. Hebrews 12:15

Have you ever noticed how *testing* in our lives can quickly turn to *temptation* in our lives? When in the "thick" of difficulty (God's allowed discipline), we can begin to search for the way out. And often we turn to relieving the ach of our soul through sin. So often in difficulty, we miss the grace of God because we want to mask our pain.

Verses 15 – 17 show us the downward, destructive spiral that takes place when we choose to do that. First, *we become bitter*. God disciplines us for our good. His discipline is to develop us, not to discourage us. But if we turn away in hardness of heart from God’s loving discipline in our lives, we will become bitter.ⁱⁱ

Why do we grow bitter?ⁱⁱⁱ Frank Minirth in his book *How to Beat Burnout* suggests several reasons. First, there is what we see here: *a wrong response to adversity* in our lives. But there are other factors, too. For instance, we may be driven by wrong motives or jealousy. Bitterness is often associated with jealousy. A business man envies the successes of his colleagues. A student is consumed with jealousy towards fellow students. A pastor or missionary is envious of others who have experienced more outward success.

Another factor in bitterness is *conditional love*. Paul brings this out when he writes to the Colossian believers: “Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them” (NKJV, Colossians 3:19). I know of no better arena for experiencing God’s developmental discipline in our lives than marriage. Since opposites attract, people who get married more often than not have to work through their differences. Illus.

A final factor and probably the most basic cause of bitterness is *an unforgiving spirit*. Paul writes to the Ephesians: “Get rid of all bitterness...be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:31-32). Remember, there is no wrong committed against you or me that can even begin to be compared to the debt that you and I have already been forgiven in Christ!

B. Immorality (16a)

When we “miss” the grace of God in our difficulty, not only do we become bitter, but we begin to develop other strategies to mask our pain. One of the most common strategies is immorality. Why is this? Because our sexuality is a desire for intimacy. We all – both men and women – have longed for belonging, and our sexuality is an expression of that.

I’ve discovered in my counseling that men (and women for that matter) are most prone to compromise biblical values in this area when under duress and stress. Why? Because we want to mask the pain of life. And so rather than embrace the grace of God, we miss the grace of God by pursuing illegitimate sex. You see, immorality is like a cat’s paw. When lightly stroked it is soft and pleasurable, but increased pressure brings out the claws of sin that will shred your very life.^{iv}

C. Godlessness (16b)

But bitterness and immorality are not the only ways we try to mask our pain. He goes on to say, “See to it that no one is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son” (Hebrews 12:16). Do you remember the story?

One day Jacob was cooking stew when Esau arrived home exhausted from the hunt. But Esau comes up to him and says, “Boy, am I starved! Give me a bite of that red stuff there!” (By the way, this is how Esau got his nickname “Edom,” which means “Red Stuff.”). Jacob says: “All right, trade me your birthright for it!”

“When a man is dying of starvation, what good is his birthright?” Esau replies. Then Jacob gave Esau bread, peas, and stew; so he ate and drank and went on about his business, totally indifferent to the loss of the rights he had just thrown away.^v

You and I can be just like Esau. We’re exhausted. The fight is too hard, the battle too long. And rather than turning to the grace of God, we say, “Give me some of that stuff!” Whatever it is...a bigger house, more clothes, a better car, a better position, another wife...but whatever it is I want it now to satisfy this unbearable ache in my soul. That is *godlessness*. Godlessness is developing strategies to live life and relieve the pain apart from God.

D. Loss of inheritance (16b – 17)

And what is the result? Loss of inheritance! “Afterward, 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” (Hebrews 12:17) Esau’s inheritance privileges were revoked and no matter what he did, he could not change this fact.

We too can lose our inheritance! I’m not speaking of salvation, but the inheritance of reward. In the New Testament there are two kinds of inheritance. There is the inheritance of *salvation*, which is eternal life (Titus 3:7). But there is also the inheritance of *reward*, conditioned on obedience (Colossians 3:23-25). If you are like Esau, and pursue the path of bitterness, immorality and godlessness, you might be saved, but you too will forfeit your reward.

II. WE CAN EMBRACE GOD’S GRACE AND GROW BETTER (12:12-14).

However, there is a far better path to choose. We discover that pathway in verses 12-14. Picture a Christian brother or sister who trembling from spiritual and emotional exhaustion. Maybe that brother or sister is you. You’re faced with a choice: you can miss God’s grace and grow *bitter* in your difficulties. Or you can embrace God’s grace and grow *better* through your difficulties.

How do we embrace God’s grace? By first of all pursuing healing:

A. Pursue healing (12-13)

Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. Hebrews 12:12-13

In reading this verse, my thoughts went immediately to how my knees feel at times when on the Cascade Express at Mount Hood Meadows. Several years ago, when I took Justin skiing for the first time, I felt like a pro. I mean, he was pretty well limited to the elementary slopes and more often than not, I was waiting on him. About two years ago, all that began to change. Now we can both take the lift to the highest run on the mountain, Cascade Express, and Justin will beat me to the bottom by a good 2-3 minutes. He’ll often be standing there with a smile on his face, “Well, what happened Dad? Did you get ‘spaghetti legs’ again?” “Spaghetti legs” has become our

expression for “weak knees.” On the longer runs, full of moguls and turns, the knees take quite a beating for a 54 year-old body.

Maybe you feel that way today. You’ve got spiritual “spaghetti legs.” The twists, turns and bumps in the road of life have just about done you in. How do we gain new strength?

First, we need to *look up*. Notice verse 3 of this chapter: “Consider him who endured such opposition of sinful men, *so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*” How do we strengthen our spiritual “spaghetti legs?” We look up to Jesus. We remember his example. “For it has been granted to you,” Paul writes, “not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for his sake.”

We look up, to Jesus. But we also *look ahead*. Why do I say that? Because verse 12 is a quote from Isaiah 35 –

Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
say to those with fearful hearts,
“Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come...”^{vi} Isaiah 35:3-4

Believer, Jesus Christ is coming back. We live now only in the shadowlands. Heaven is the promised reality that we are looking for and moving towards. W.A. Criswell was once asked, “Will we know each other when we get to heaven?” His answer: We won’t really know each other *until* we get to heaven.

How do we strengthen our weak arms and feeble knees? We look up to Jesus. We look ahead to his coming. And we *look out* for one another. The commands of these two verses are *corporate* commands. They describe what we are to do, not only for ourselves, but also for one another. We see this also in verses 15 and 16: “see to it...” (2x). In the language of the writer, this command comes from the same word as the word for “overseer” or “elder” in the New Testament. But here, it is not just the elders who are to look out for the whole church. All of us are to look out for one another, that we might be healed.

How do we do this? I believe that the parallel passage of James 5 gives us some insight. Look with me at James 5:13-16.

13 Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. ..14 Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be **healed**. James 5:13-16 [Pew Bible page number]

We’ve looked at this passage in depth on another occasion, so I won’t go into detail here. I’ll just point out that the word “healed” in verse 16 is the same word used for “healed” in Hebrews 12:13.^{vii} And interestingly, both Hebrews and James are speaking of a situation of difficulty and

testing. For James, mutual prayer and confession are vital to spiritual and emotional healing. And I would think that the writer to the Hebrews had this in mind also.

We are urged to confess; but we so often prefer to conceal and camouflage our sins. During the dark ages, people confessed to a priest. Then Freud came along and said “Go confess to a counselor.” Today many in the church say, “I’m not going to confess to anybody!” And as a result, we have a lot of hidden hurts, habits and hang-ups that fester and enslave us.

B. Pursue peace (14a)

How do we embrace God’s grace? We pursue mutual healing. But we also pursue peace: “Make every effort to live in peace with all men...” (Hebrews 12:14). Sometimes God is using our relationships with others as a form of discipline in our lives. But our human tendency is to pull away and remove ourselves from the very ones that God might be using to speak into our lives. Don’t do this. Keep the unity! In your trouble, don’t pull away from the Body of believers! If there is ever a time when you need other believers speaking into your life, it is in times of difficulty and discipline.

C. Pursue holiness (14b)

Finally, we pursue holiness. “Make every effort ...to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” The writer has already said in verse 10 that “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.” With all due respect to Charlie Brown, God’s primary concern is not our happiness, but our holiness. We embrace God’s grace in our difficulty by submitting to God’s discipline and allowing it to make us the holy people that He wants us to be.^{viii}

Let me ask you:

1. In what area of your life are you “weak” and “feeble?” Where do you need the strength of others in the Body of Christ holding you up?
2. Where have you failed to live in peace with other believers? Do you need to ask forgiveness of someone and be reconciled to that person?
3. Is there a bitter root that is causing trouble in your own life and hindering the life of the Body of Christ?
4. What immorality do you need to repent of this morning? In what area of your life are you compromising the inheritance that God has promised you?

In your difficulty and testing, don’t miss out on the grace of God, but embrace it. Will you do that today? As we sing in response, you might want to come to the center of the auditorium and kneel here. Or you might want to simply pray right where you are, asking God to search your own heart. Or you might want to go to someone and get things right. Whatever your response, don’t miss out on the grace of God’s discipline.

Notes

ⁱ Cf. Hebrews 4:1 where the same term refers to “falling short” of entering into the promised rest.

ⁱⁱ The Old Testament context for this reference to bitterness is found in Deuteronomy 29:18-19: “Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the LORD our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison. When such a person hears the words of this oath, he invokes a blessing on himself and therefore thinks, “I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way.” This will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Adapted from Frank Minerth, Don Hawkins, Paul Meier, Richard Flournoy, *How to Beat Burnout* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), ch. 4.

^{iv} Illustration clipped from DTS illustration file.

^v Gen 25:29-34 *TLB*

^{vi} The passage goes on to say: “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.” Isaiah 35:3-6

^{vii} And Peter says this: “...and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were *healed*.” (1 Peter 2:24, NASB).

^{viii} 1 John 3:2-3 indicates that all believers will be sinless when they see the Lord as his coming. But the writer may also be saying that even now our perception of God is in direct relationship to our practical holiness. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” Matthew 5:8.