

Christ, The Pedagogue

“My son, despise not thou the chastening [training] of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him: For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth [trains] and scourgeth [punishes] every son whom He receiveth” (Hebrews 12:5,6).

It is tempting for Church leadership, in searching for leverage, to so focus on the negative aspects of the faith, that the vitality of the relationship to Christ is all but overwhelmed. It is like the situation, not at all uncommon, where parents are so busy with discipline that they forget to nurture the positive relationship of love and *camaraderie*. In a great many years of dealing with young people, the author has often heard the complaint—“The only time my mom and dad ever talk to me is when they’re unhappy about something.” Parents often “run scared,” fearing that if they don’t keep after their young people continually, they will lose control over them. How often have you asked your young person to help, rather than *demand*? How often have you said please and thank you to them? How long since you told them how much you appreciate having them as your son or daughter? A common response is—“If I don’t yell at them, they won’t do what I tell them.” (If they won’t do what you *tell* them, maybe they will do what you *ask* them).

But what has this to do with Hebrews 12? It has everything to do with Hebrews 12. It is important to this passage as well as the whole matter of “chastening” which often has a negative rather than positive focus. The Church is very much caught up in “leverage.” How often the complaint of the pastor is that he can’t get the people out to help. He often thinks he has to “put the fear of God in them” to get them to do anything. Maybe the problem is that he is trying to motivate the people in the flesh to shoulder fleshly programs. The question is, are we trying to motivate them in the flesh, or to let the Spirit motivate them in the spirit? The Spirit has the power to motivate His people to do what He wants them to do. He will not motivate them to do what we want them to do. Perhaps the reason that people are not motivated is that many programs we are engaged in are of the flesh and not of the spirit.

Again, what has this to do with Hebrews 12? The answer is that the demand for leverage has made of Christianity a system of Pharisaical rules and regulations and cultivated a religious facade rather than a vitality of a heart for Christ.

But isn’t that what Hebrews 12 is all about? Is the author not showing that the people of God need to be “chastened” in order to develop properly in the pursuit of righteousness? Isn’t he trying to say that the very chastening is the proof of sonship?

That, of course, is the conventional application. But remember, this book is written to the Jews. So its title suggests. As usual, the focus is on the terrible years of apostasy and the faithfulness of God in giving them a chance to recover. The quotation is from the Old Testament (Proverbs 3:11,12). In fact, if one examines the Concordance, one will find that the term is almost exclusively an Old Testament term. There are very few passages in the New Testament that use the expression and then it is the word that has the connotation of “child-training”—*paideuo* and always in the sense of simple discipline rather than the kind of chastening that was needed by Israel in response to her apostasy.

So are you saying that God does not discipline Christians?

No, by no means. I am saying that the focus of the New Testament is on the work of the Spirit within us rather than upon punishment for wrongdoing. The entire legal system of the Old Testament was based upon penalties. The Law was a matter of “do this and live.” The New Testament is “live and do this.” In other words, the coming of the Holy Spirit

was a fulfillment of the prophecies of the Law being written upon the heart rather than upon tables of stone.

The central message of Hebrews 12 is that God had not cast off His people, as Paul so emphatically teaches in Romans 9-11, but chastened them for the very reason that he still regarded them as His children. He wants them restored and indeed has determined to do so. The final statement of this passage is—“Make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is laid be turned out of the way, but rather be healed.”

But what about the discipline of Christians?

First of all, let it be understood that I was not denying the possibility of discipline, but only suggesting that the main focus of the New Testament is positive—the energy of the Holy Spirit within giving us the desire to please Christ. If our only motivation is the fleshly focus on penalty, what difference is there between ourselves and the Jews under the Law? If punishment and discipline is the essence of our relationship to Christ, how can we ever be expected to find peace and joy in that relationship? If becoming a Christian is merely a matter of having the privilege of getting on the “treadmill,” what kind of offer is that? Actually, Christ says the opposite—“*Come unto Me all you that Labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me; For I am meek and lowly in heart: And ye shall find rest unto your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light*” (Matthew 11:28-30). There is a yoke, but it is easy to bear. The Greek word here for “easy” is a word which means “cut to fit.” It is a yoke that we can handle and does not partake of the burdens “grievous to be born” laid upon the Jews by the Pharisees. One can indeed feel accepted of Christ and live at peace with Him in the normal course of life.

Are you saying that Christians can do anything they please?

Yes and no. In a way they can do what they please, but what please them is to please Christ. On the other hand, the desire to please Christ does not always keep one from displeasing Him. The flesh is not easy to overcome. So that is where discipline comes in. In the Hebrews 12 passage, the word for “chastening” is *paideuo* which means “child-training.” We have a prefix in our language—*pedo*—which refers to children. Thus—“pediatrics,” “pediatrician,” and a word that comes right out of the Greek, “pedagogue.” All of these terms have to do with training by whatever means necessary. Thus, sometimes discipline is called for (possibly even spanking and sometimes rewards. In the study of child psychology we have an expression—“positive and negative reinforcement.” Children need to learn right and wrong. When they are right, we reinforce that by positive means—praise or reward. When they are wrong, we reinforce that by negative means—discipline of whatever nature is effective. The discipline, however, must fit the “crime.” Discipline that is excessive is not really discipline, but revenge. The word “discipline” means “to teach.” Any discipline that does not have teaching as its primary function is not sound discipline. Parents may lash out in anger and be more bent on getting back at the child for disobeying them. In this respect, it is well to remember that a gradual process of steady and consistent teaching is more effective than the spontaneous urge to “straighten out” the child in a hurry. Ultimately, the objective is to see that the child grows up understanding a right set of values and being motivated to perform in keeping with them.

But all of that sounds pretty mild to really do the job. Didn't Solomon say to “beat them with rods, and save their souls from hell?”

In the first place, Solomon was not a role model of Christian perfection. In the second place, the misuse of that passage has led many Christians into child abuse. In the third place, remember that Jesus had quite a different attitude—*“Suffer the little children to come unto Me and forbid them not for such is the kingdom of heaven.”* He also said that if one would harm one of these little ones, *“It would better for him that a millstone be hanged about his neck and he be drowned in the sea.”* He rebuked the disciples just for holding the children back from coming to Him. I think He would have had some questions to ask Solomon.

Now, how does this apply to the passage we are looking at? The word “chastening” has a negative connotation to it. That is why we prefer the term “training,” which is a more accurate translation of *paideuo*. We are children who need to be trained, not “cattle to be driven.” When Christ rules “with a rod of iron” it will be over the large number of unregenerated, whom He keeps under control in the last days during the Millennial period. Peace on earth at that time, comes not from everyone becoming Christians, but from the power of Christ to make His sovereignty stick. Christ certainly does discipline His children, but in the context of training them rather than “punishing them.”

But how do we know the difference between misfortunes that come to us because of the world we live in or because of Satan, and misfortunes that come because the Lord is disciplining us?

That is a very good question. If you are having a good deal of trouble and are wondering why, especially wondering if you are being disciplined, remember well that if the Lord has something to say to you, He will let you know. He did not have anything to say to Job until the end of his troubles. Don't go on fishing trips. If you don't know, and the Lord doesn't tell you, you can assume that these are trials that are from another source. Sometimes we are just victims of a world presided over by Satan. Sometimes we are directly troubled by Satan who tries to throw us off course. Job resisted the efforts of his three friends to put the blame on himself. And Christ will help you to resist. If Satan is troubling you, Christ will help you to stand. You cannot stand in your own strength, so don't try. When Satan comes knocking, send Christ to the door. Don't try to battle Satan with pious efforts and extensive prayers. You will never be good enough or pray hard enough to be a match for Satan. Jesus and the apostles counteracted Satan with one word and Christ will do that for you. It does not mean your troubles will be over, but it means that you will stand fast in spite of Satan's efforts.

In the training process, Christ may indeed allow you to face the consequences of bad decisions. He does not send these consequences but rather allows them. We all learn from the mistakes that we make and it may be a way that Christ is showing us to consider situations more carefully.

The passage in Hebrews teaches us that God does the training wisely. He will bring you along on your journey with grace and effectiveness. If Christ is involved in disciplining you, you will respond equally with grace. If others are trying to discipline you or pressure you to follow their instructions, it may come with resentment rather than grace and acceptance. We may not always like what Christ is doing in helping us to shape our lives, but if it is from Him, it will minister to us peace and acceptance.

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