

Disciplined

Isaiah 6:18-21

Psalm 117

Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13

Luke 13:22-30

An irritated father complained to his golf buddy, saying, “When I was a kid, my parents sent me to my room without supper if I misbehaved. But my son has his own television, phone, computer, X-Box, and stereo in his room!” “So how do you discipline him?” his friend asked. “I send him to MY room!”

Discipline is an important part of any child’s life; it is extremely important for their emotional, social, and moral growth. Yet, most children interpret discipline simply as suffering and ALL OF US hate suffering!

Regardless of our age, all of us try to avoid suffering, yet it finds its way into our lives in many different forms. Suffering can be physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. There are lots of causes of suffering in our lives. Suffering is sometimes caused by the natural movements of our world, like earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and tornados. Suffering can also be caused by our own sinfulness or poor choices. Oftentimes, suffering is caused by the sins and poor choices of other people or the injustice of whole groups of people. Demonic manifestations can also be the source of our suffering. Mature Christians sometimes experience intercessory suffering—a form of sacrificial prayer for another person. Regardless of the origin of suffering, there is one extremely important thing that we can say about it—God wants to use it to teach us something important!

God wants to use everything in life for our benefit, including suffering! Saint Ignatius of Loyola understood this fact. While most of us consider sickness, poverty, failure, and death as types of suffering, Saint Ignatius saw them as *opportunities* to encounter God and be taught by God. In his Spiritual Exercises, Saint Ignatius explains how God can use *everything* in life for our benefit, including suffering.

We should not fix our desires on health or sickness,
wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or short one.
For everything has the potential of calling forth in us
a deeper response to our life in God.

-Principle and Foundation, *paraphrased by David Fleming, S.J.*

Our second reading today from the letter to the Hebrews has a similar message. In chapter twelve, the author of the letter to the Hebrews explains how suffering can be a form of discipline—a way for God to mold us in holiness. The key to our understanding our second reading is to understand the meaning of the Greek word that the author used for “discipline” (παιδείω). It does not mean “punishment” or “anger,” but rather, it has the same root as the word, “disciple.” In this way, discipline means to train children or to cause them to learn by molding their character. Therefore, God’s discipline is always like that of a father teaching his children and molding their character.

Using a popular Jewish writing technique of a “lesser” example highlighting a “greater” example, the author of Hebrews explains God’s fatherly discipline, writing, “Endure your trials

as ‘discipline’; God treats you as sons. For what ‘son’ is there whom his father does not discipline?” (Hebrews 12:7). In other words, if a good father lovingly disciplines—teaches his children and molds their character—how much more does God the Father do that for His children?

The idea of suffering being an opportunity to be disciplined, or taught, by God was not a new one in New Testament times. In fact, the author of Hebrews quoted a far more ancient text in our reading today. The Book of Proverbs, written more than five centuries earlier, states—

The discipline of the LORD, my son, disdain not; spurn not his reproof;
For whom the LORD loves he reproves, and he chastises the son he favors.
-Proverbs 3:11-12

While suffering may often feel like punishment, and while many people often mistake it for God’s anger or wrath, the author of Hebrews makes it clear that suffering is an opportunity for us to be taught by God, which reflects a beautiful intimacy with Him. This doesn’t mean that suffering is easy, though.

The fact that suffering is used by God to discipline us—to make us holy—does not take away the fact that it hurts! Our second reading today testifies to this fact, saying “At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain...” (Hebrews 12:11a). However, the author recognizes that the pain is *never* the whole truth of our situation, but rather, the greatest truth is *how God is using* the suffering, which “brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11b). Therefore the author encourages us, “So strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees” (Hebrews 12:12). When we truly understand that God uses our suffering to teach us and mold our character, we no longer mope around with “drooping hands” and “weak knees,” but rather we are filled with hope! Saint Paul explains this in his letter to the Romans—

We even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint...

-Romans 5:3-5a

No matter what we’re suffering thru right now in our lives, God wants to use it to teach us something about ourselves and something about His love. Therefore, our hope is ultimately not found in God fixing our situation and ending our suffering, but rather, hope is found in understanding how God is using our suffering to lovingly teach us. This is God’s way and it’s a different way than the way of the world, which has no use for suffering. Pope Benedict XVI makes this point in his book, The Apostles, writing, “We... expect God to be strong in the world and to transform the world on the spot, according to our ideas and the needs that we perceive. [However] God chooses a different way. God chooses the way of the transformation of hearts in suffering and humility.”¹

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ Spend some time in prayer, journaling to God your answers to the following questions— what suffering am I going through right now in my life? What is the origin/cause of my suffering? What is God teaching me about myself and about His love through the suffering? Where have I found HOPE in the midst of this particular suffering?

¹ The Apostles, Pope Benedict XVI, Our Sunday Visitor, Inc. 2007, pg. 49.