

11 – Think On This

May 17, 2020

“Disciplined”

Of late I have heard the misguided sentiment of ‘well meaning’ Christians that covid 19 is God’s punishment on a world that has gone astray. To make matters worse these well meaning believers are invoking scriptures to prove their point. Using bits and pieces to defend a judgmental point of view is at best ‘misguided’ and at worst dangerous ‘heresy’. Quoting these words from James 4 - *“Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.”* – and then talking about our world being a ‘post Christian’ world and accusing the world of becoming more and more pagan sounds right! And of course those words are a great set up to offering such Biblical advice as, *“Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”* When the Christian community offers this kind of thinking in the context of covid 19 it does not surprise me to hear Hebrews 12 being misquoted as well.

*“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”* (quoted from Prov.3)

- First of all, none of these passages were written for the ‘world’. They were written for followers of Jesus Christ who were acting like hypocrites.
- Second, James is writing to Worldly Christians hurting each other while Hebrews was written for believers being persecuted by the world.
- Third, the *discipline* being spoken of is not about punishment. Its about the training up of a child or an athlete.

Pulling passages out of their original context and misapplying them to a new context is an abuse of God’s Word. It is why seminaries have courses in hermeneutics. Both James 4 and Hebrews 12 quote pieces from Proverbs 3 which is also written for the believer. Both James and Paul are familiar with the wisdom literature of the Old Testament that encourages applying the wisdom/words of God to our every day lives. The words of Proverbs 3 are God’s encouragement for us to keep **His ways** in our hearts. Imagine the words of verses 9 and 10 of Proverbs 3 ringing in Jesus’ ears as he tells his followers how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom and that we cannot serve both God and mammon.

*9 Honor the Lord with your wealth,
with the first fruits of all your crops;
10 then your barns will be filled to overflowing,
and your vats will brim over with new wine.*

Jesus does this often. He maintains the integrity of the original context as he addresses his current context. It is exactly what he was doing in the sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7.

Jesus knew that giving our first fruits was not about giving God what He needs or deserves. God does not need our money and what little we give comes nowhere near to what he deserves. We are to give our first fruits so that we will have to rely on Him, so he can prove himself faithful, so that we will stay near him and lean on him for everything. Giving our wealth to God is about what we need. When we honor God with our wealth our barns will overflow with HIM. Our vats will brim with the new wine of HIS sacrifice for us, HIS blood and HIS forgiveness, so that we will be near HIM because without HIS forgiveness we cannot be near HIM. This is what David writes of in Psalm 103,

*9 He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;
10 he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.
11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
12 as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
13 As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;
14 for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.*

The truth about punishment is found in Isaiah 53,
*he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.*

We are not punished precisely because Jesus was. If believers are saying that God brought covid 19 to punish sinners are they not saying that Jesus' sacrifice wasn't enough, that God had to add to Christ's sacrifice on the cross? That is dangerous heresy. We confess in Q. and A. # 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism, "...that he has fully paid for all my sins...". No Christian should ever think when hardship of any kind comes that God is punishing us.

The word used for 'discipline' in Hebrews 12 is 'paideuei' which is from the word 'paidi' meaning child. This reference for discipline comes from Proverbs 22, "...Train up a child in way they should go ...". The 'training' here is of the sort used with those training for a race or some athletic event. A weightlifter will train differently than a long distance runner or figure skater. The point is that the training that Paul speaks to in Hebrews 12 is specific and repetitive behaviors and exercises that keep us close to Christ our Lord. It is about relying on HIM instead of our own understanding. I am sure God could and would use covid 19 and anything else in our world to help us learn to trust and obey with all our heart, and with all our mind and with all our soul. But God does not inflict hardship on us as a punishment.

While covid 19 may move many believers and unbelievers to think about God there are many things in our lives that we can use to help us think more about God and his nearness to us. Ignatius Loyola taught a very simple practice to aid in our awareness of God's presence. Before going to sleep each night, he instructed his followers to recall the events of their day from beginning to end—their activities, conversations, feelings, and struggles. In the process, they were to ask, "Lord, show me how you were with me today." Looking back, one might discover his presence in a moment of kindness, in a scene of beauty, in the joy of a stranger's smile, or amid the pain of a loss. This is the sort of exercise we can use to discipline ourselves to be more mindful of God and the presence of his Spirit in our lives.

In his blog "With God Daily", Skye Jethani reminds us of the fact that Jacob, when he awoke from his dream of angels ascending and descending on a ladder says, *"Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it."* Our spiritual discipline is more about practicing our awareness of God, the very thing the Apostle Paul prays for when he says,

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better... to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

In the same letter to the church of Ephesus Paul reminds us that, *"Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath but that because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved."*

Jesus was punished so that we could be his disciples living lives of disciplined obedience, trusting in HIM. Covid 19 may be a means by which God may further prove his love for us but it is not his punishment upon us. Love is not learned through punishment but through GRACE.

In 1849 a young man came forward at a meeting conducted by Dwight L. Moody. He said he was not sure about everything he'd heard that night but would just "trust and obey". The worship leader that night was Daniel Towner. He wrote down those simple words and sent them to his friend Rev. John H. Sammis who penned the words to the now famous hymn –

TRUST AND OBEY.

1. When we walk with the Lord,
in the light of his word,
what a glory he sheds on our way!
While we do his good will,
he abides with us still,
and with all who will trust and obey.

Trust and obey, for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

2. Not a burden we bear,
not a sorrow we share,
but our toil he doth richly repay;
not a grief or a loss,
not a frown or a cross,
but is blest if we trust and obey.

Trust and obey, for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

3. But we never can prove
the delights of his love
until all on the altar we lay;
for the favor he shows,
for the joy he bestows,
are for them who will trust and obey.

Trust and obey, for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

4. Then in fellowship sweet
we will sit at his feet,
or we'll walk by his side in the way;
what he says we will do,
where he sends we will go;
never fear, only trust and obey.

Trust and obey, for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

Prayer

Father in Heaven we thank You that You can do anything. We want to trust in Your ability and not our own. Teach us to see difficulties in our lives from Your perspective. Help us to focus on You and Your power. Help us to see you in all our circumstances and to trust You in this situation. You are mighty, powerful, righteous and true. We pray that You will help our researchers to find the vaccine for covid 19 and that we will also learn that we have nothing to fear. Teach us especially now to walk by faith and not by sight so that we can make You “...*our boast all day long, and praise your name forever*” (Psalm 44:5-8).

“Lord, you have assigned each of us our portion and cup; you have made our lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for us in pleasant places; surely we have a delightful inheritance. We will praise You, Lord, who counsels us; even at night our hearts instruct us.” (Psalm 16).

You have promised that You “...will not abandon us to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to us the path of life; you will fill us with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand” (Psalm 16).

We pray too Lord for those who mourn the loss of loved ones at this time. We think of Gerald and Colleen and their family and Hilda and her family as they mourn the loss of Hielke Wieringa. We thank you Lord that he finally has his reward and that he now knows about those ‘eternal pleasures at your right hand’. We pray for all those who must adjust their grieving process. Bless them Lord and thank you that we at least can see these on line.

Thankyou for sparing Ron and hearing all the prayers offered for his healing. Thank you that he could finally get out of the hospital. We thank you Lord for all the stories of people helping and loving and lifting others up. Thank you for our heightened sense of community for all the leaders who tirelessly demonstrate a calm demeanor and hopeful stance who must make hard policy decisions in the face of growing angst. Continue to stir in us a positive outlook and creative responses to new challenges. Thank you for Dr. Retief’s positive response to our ‘call’ for him to be our next pastor. We pray Father that you will clear the way for him to arrive here safe and sound that he might begin the work you have given him to do here as soon as possible.

Help us to be like those angels on Jacob’s ladder, going up to see your face, to be empowered by your presence so that we might come down to be your hands and feet to those You have given us to serve. Guard our hearts and our minds and our bodies and remind us often of the sacrifice of Jesus ... taking our punishment upon him, self to restore and reconcile us to you so that you could be near to each one of us In Jesus name, amen.

Taken in part from ‘A prayer for trusting in God in hard times’ at
<https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/prayer/a-prayer-for-trusting-god-in-hard-times.html>

A video of Ron leaving the Hospital can be seen at
<https://www.wlwt.com/article/loveland-man-battling-cancer-covid-19-heads-home-after-38-days-in-hospital/32406886>

**May the Lord Bless you and keep.
May he cause his face to shine upon you
and be gracious to you.
May he turn his face towards you
and grant you his peace.**

Blessings in Christ,
Pastor Kasey VanderVeen.