

Truths that are out of fashion Discipline

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
NKJV Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

In this talk we will continue to look at truths that are unpalatable in today's society and have become quite unfashionable. However, as with the other talks in this series, the Christian doctrine of discipline is not only useful, but also essential to a well-ordered society and a well-adjusted individual. It was Abraham Lincoln who said: "Discipline is choosing between what you want now and what you want most." Sadly, too many today take the immediate enjoyment of self-fulfilment now, failing to realise that it will lead to long term discontent. The need for immediate results, affirmation today and the possessing of what should rightly be long-term goals now, has contributed in no small part to the epidemic of mental health issues and general discontent within modern society. However, the issue is not new. It was Plato who said: "For a man to conquer himself is the first and noblest of all victories." For man, living without the recognition of God, this is indeed true. However, it is the discipline of God that we must turn to first in this talk, before we then look at self-discipline, family discipline and finally church discipline. [Webster's dictionary defines discipline as "training that corrects, moulds or perfects the mental faculties or moral character."](#)

I would like to start the consideration of the discipline of God by reading Hebrews chapter 12: 5-11:

"And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives." If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore, strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees."

We need to recognise that we live in a fallen world. For some, the thought of a father's discipline, or of any other figure in authority, will be a painful one. Undoubtedly, some have used their position as a cover for abuse and this must be rightly condemned without reservation. However, we do not improve things by rejecting the concept of discipline. Because the picture has

sometimes been blurred, we do not stop our use of our eyes. The discipline that God exerts is always exactly right and is always for our good, though we will often feel the pain of it. The great sculptures of Michaelangelo were made by thousands of individual cuts which on the one hand destroyed the original block of marble, but which, on the other, produced something far better.

The writer to the Hebrews correctly points out that discipline is a clear sign of family relationship. God disciplines us because we are his sons (I use this term, as Scripture does, to cover both men and women). If we were not sons, then wrong behaviour would be judged and receive due punishment. However, because we are sons, God will act when he sees wrong attitudes or wrong behaviour to faithfully recreate the features of Christ in my life. When I caught the bus to work, there were often times when a child was misbehaving on the bus. I had to sit on my hands because they were no child of mine. However, if the same behaviour had come from one of my children, they would soon have experienced some form of discipline, for I did not want that kind of behaviour repeating.

Discipline is always undertaken with the aim of correcting wrong behaviour, to replace it with something that is better. That is why the writer to Hebrews describes it as “for our profit.” An individual who is allowed their own way in everything, and has not experienced any kind of discipline, will be a spoilt individual who fails to accomplish their true potential. I was listening to a singer describing the time her voice coach had forced her to exercise in the gym daily. She had hated the sessions and yet recognised that it improved her lung function and thus her ability to sing. I had just enjoyed the pleasure of listening to her singing – she had experienced the pain of discipline, but it made her the person she was.

The purpose of discipline is also given by the writer to Hebrews; that we may be partakers of His holiness. We naturally say that we want to be like Christ. Too often, by this, we mean that we would like to do dramatic miracles that would win us renown or talk in a way that crowds would come to listen. However, if we truly want to be like Christ then we are first going to have to endure the discipline of God. This, as the Scripture tells us, is not going to be pleasant but rather painful. The discipline of God can take many forms. For Paul, it was a thorn in the flesh – some physical ailment – that three times led the Apostle to pray to God that it might be removed. God answered the prayer, but not in the way that Paul might have wished. Had the affliction been removed, Paul would have learnt that God answers prayer but not much more. However, he learnt a far greater lesson – that the grace of God was sufficient for him. This was so, not only in that specific circumstance but also in every situation that Paul would go through. So, God may also use ill health in our lives as a way of changing us. It may be other difficult circumstances – bereavement, unemployment, financial pressures, smallness and weakness in the public Christian testimony. Our initial response tends to be how can I stop this. Perhaps popping a pill, or moving out of the immediate circumstance, running away to easier situations may each present themselves as an immediate fix.

However, what I really need to do first is to ask myself what lesson it is that God is trying to teach me in this particular situation. God may well have viewed a wrong attitude or pattern of behaviour that needs to be corrected first. I would love to be a part of a large church congregation for the singing. However, because I am inherently lazy, I know that if I was, I would soon let everybody else, anybody else, do all that needed to be done, whilst I just pleased myself with my model making and television watching. This is not the kind of person God wants me to be, for it was not the kind of Person that His Son was: “even Christ pleased not Himself” (Romans 15:3). The discipline of God will continue for as long as it takes for me to learn the lessons I need to learn. This may be a lifetime of learning but I too, like Paul, can rejoice in the fact that His grace is sufficient for me. Learning to live life in His strength is such a valuable lesson to learn. [Reacting to His discipline in the right way is vital. We are encouraged to “strengthen the hands that hang down, and the feeble knees.” The temptation to give up may seem overwhelming. However, it is always the wrong course to follow. Instead, in total dependence upon Him, we are to “press](#)

toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14). I find that it helps to shorten my perspective. Instead of worrying about tomorrow, or next week or whenever, I just need to know that I can continue for today. Taking each day, one at a time, is the right way to become dependent upon Him. He promises strength to face all that today may hold and that is sufficient.

We now need to look at the subject of self-discipline, and to direct our thoughts we will consider two passages of Scripture. First:

“If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire” (Matthew 18:8-9).

“To the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel’s sake, that I may be partaker of it with you. Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:22-27).

These really are some very challenging verses in the Bible. We must not look to dilute the force of what is being said either. With the Lord’s words in Matthew, we too easily fall back on the position that the Lord is not actually advocating that we engage in self-mutilation. Whilst that is true that is because, in the strongest possible terms, Jesus was saying that we need to stop pleasing self and start living for a future world. It really would be better to arrive in Heaven horribly mutilated than to miss out due to a life lived ignoring future realities. Sin is that serious to God, and the sins of laziness, pride and worry to name but three are no less serious than murder and theft just because they are more socially acceptable.

Paul then likens the Christian life to the life of an elite sportsperson. In the pursuit of faithful service and the salvation of souls Paul would deny himself very many things. He is not talking about compromising on essential truth, nor being two faced, saying one thing in one situation and the opposite in another situation. Paul was quite prepared to forgo legitimate pleasures and rights if these were going to prove a stumbling block to others. In doing so, he was acting like an athlete, training for the games. Under the rules of the old Olympic Games, to even be allowed to take part an athlete had to reach a required standard. To do this, they would have to deny themselves many things – certain foods, holidays and the like for nothing was allowed to get in the way of the training schedule. Everything was focused on the goal of success. Nor was Paul wanting to just be the athlete who made up the numbers in the race. He was there to win!

When I worked in the laboratory, part of my training included being given a set of results and having to give a potential diagnosis, suggesting further tests that could be done to confirm this. I hated these, as it really meant you needed to know your stuff! However, for that exact reason, they were effective. So that we get an idea of what Paul is saying I would like to give three examples of how self-discipline works out in practice.

First, I have to work late, and it is the mid-week prayer meeting and Bible-study at church. Do I go home and have a meal and then put my feet up after a long day at work? Paul would suggest that I discipline my body to delay having a meal and putting my feet up and attend the church service and then attend to my bodily needs.

Second, I find myself increasingly frustrated by the noise the little children are making in church, and the fact that their parents never tidy up after them so that the church is always a little untidy. Do I lose my temper with the children and tell the parents that they need to exert more control over their children so that the building is always spotless? Paul would suggest that I do not give vent to my frustrations but speak only words of encouragement and kindness. Further, he would encourage me to selflessly tidy up after them and provide an environment in which they can enjoy being in church.

Third, I have always wanted to buy myself a particular model kit. It would look fantastic when completed, although at that level of difficulty, it would take a lot of hours to do it justice and the price is quite steep, but you do get what you pay for. Then a financial need arises on the mission field, and extra help is also required at church. What is the right thing to do? Paul would suggest that for now, I increase my giving to support others serving Him, and get involved in my local fellowship, providing the help that will be such an encouragement to others.

In all three scenarios, and a thousand others that crop up in our lives, legitimate pleasures and desires need to be rejected for a greater good. It is not the goal of self-aggrandisement that motivates us either but rather the ultimate glory of the Lord. A footballer may be excellent, and be celebrated by the fans, but ultimately, it is the team that is successful. No player is bigger than the club.

The call to self-discipline is not so that we might leave a legacy and be remembered in a thousand years' time as a faithful servant who truly served the Lord, but rather to glorify the Lord in every situation, that others may realise that we serve a truly great God, and that He is worth such great self-sacrifice. So rather than going on a journey of self-discovery and living a life of self-indulgence we are to engage in a battle leading to the conquering of self, for as Plato said, this is the first and noblest of all victories.

Writing about the achievements of elite athletes, Simon Barnes, in his newspaper column several years ago said: "Prince Rabadash's army lay close behind them. Anvard ahead. If they did not reach Anvard before Rabadash and his horde, their journey – their entire lives – would have been wasted. The horses, Bree and Hwin galloped. "Certainly, both horses were doing, if not all they could, all they thought they could do; which is not quite the same thing." But a lion appears out of nowhere and with the spur of terror, "Bree now discovered that he had not really been going as fast – not quite as fast – as he could." This is of course, from my beloved *The Chronicles of Narnia*, that fount of a million simple and usually overlooked truths. Perhaps of all the temptations we meet in this life – money, power, sex, drink, fame – the subtlest of all is the comfort zone, that invitation to settle for less, to go for content when the stresses and miseries of overachievement beckon. The way that takes you out of the comfort zone is the path less travelled by. Most of us, when we come to that place where the two paths divide, prefer the one that leads to safety, to warmth, to comfort."

The third aspect of discipline that we need to consider is that within the family. To do this we shall consider Ephesians 5:21 – 25 and 6:1 – 4:

"Submitting to one another in the fear of God. Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Saviour of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to

their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her. Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honour your father and mother," which is the first commandment with promise: "that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth." And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord."

Christianity touches every sphere of life, and the family is not outside of the realm of Biblical teaching. It is little surprise that, with the decline of Christian influence in the Western world, we see a rise in family breakdown. These things are linked, and they really do matter. God has given us the blueprint for a successful family life, and we ignore it to our cost. Within the context of all Christians willingly submitting to one another, Paul then first addresses wives, who are to submit to their own husbands. In doing so they reflect a higher truth, namely that Christ willingly submits to God the Father. Submission can never be enforced – that is conquest and is the polar opposite to submission. In simple terms, it is a recognition that a husband is given the casting vote when required. But with that comes the responsibility before God for the well-being of the family. So, husbands are to love their wives with the same quality of love that Christ has for His church. In doing so they too witness to a higher truth. We are eternally, sacrificially loved by the Lord Jesus who has our ultimate blessing in view. This is the challenge to husbands! Do I always have my wife's good in view – even at the end of the most horrible day at work? Do I ensure that when she stands before the Lord at the Judgement seat of Christ, she will not stand there empty handed? Do I diligently seek to meet her needs? Do I even know what they are?

Children are to obey their parents and in return, particularly fathers are not to exasperate their children. Discipline should be consistent, empowering and I would suggest minimal to meet the goal of a well-run household. Too often, parents try to be their children's best friend. Now I clearly hoped that my children would grow up to like me, but I wanted more that they grow up to be Christ honouring role models to their own families and to society at large. Children thrive when they know there are boundaries. These need to be worked out between Mum and Dad and then clearly and consistently laid out by both. Children will always try to play the "Mum said, Dad said" card. Discipline requires Mum and Dad to speak with one voice. If one parent makes a mistake, they still need to be backed up in the moment, whilst afterwards mistakes can be corrected jointly.

Discipline is so much more than a physical act. I am not opposed to a sensible, restrained smack – sometimes that is the most appropriate form of censure. However, it is one of the least effective forms of enforcement. We live in an age when government may well prohibit the use of physical punishment. It concerns me when some Christians say that this should be ignored. Romans 13 is clear that the Christian's duty is to obey government unless it causes them to disobey God. The instruction to "spare the rod and spoil the child" is not found in the Bible, though Proverbs 13:24 does come close. However, it is poor exegesis to make this verse say that smacking is the only form of discipline in view. To ban smacking would, in my view, be a mistake, but if it happens then the Christian response is to obey and to continue with the job of exercising godly discipline using other, often more effective, forms of censure.

Lastly, we come to church discipline. It should be stated that this should never be needed. If individual Christians did what the Lord was leading them to do, church discipline would be utterly unnecessary. It is a sad reflection on the hardness of the human heart that this even needs to be mentioned. Acts 5:1–11 gives the solemn first instance of church discipline, when Ananias and Sapphira came under the discipline of the church for lying to the Holy Spirit. I Corinthians 5:1–5 gives a further example of church discipline, where an individual was behaving in such an immoral manner that his continued presence in the Christian company was inappropriate. However, as we see in this case, church discipline is always exercised with repentance and restoration in view. So, in 2 Corinthians 2:4 – 8 the church is encouraged to receive the repentant man back into full

fellowship. There is no sin so bad that true repentance cannot lead to an individual being received back into the church fellowship. Matthew 18:15 – 20 give the clearest outline for how church discipline should be exercised:

“Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven, or where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

The Biblical pattern is simple. If an individual sins, then this is to be sorted out quietly between the offender and the one who has been offended. That should be an end of the matter. However, if the offender refuses to repent, then two or three suitable individuals, who are either witnesses to the event, or spiritually mature enough to be able to handle the situation, should be approached, and together they will deal with the offender. By doing this, the situation where it is one person’s word against another is avoided. If the offender continues to refuse correction, then the whole church is to be informed, and a “final warning” given. If this is rejected, then a church cannot continue to have fellowship with such an offender.

The final words we read from Matthew 18 are telling. We may use them to encourage ourselves in a small company that even still, Jesus is with us. In fact, their context lies within the exercise of discipline. All need to realise that what is being done is being done in the company of none other than the Lord Himself. This is necessary for two reasons. It will stop me bringing petty accusations against a fellow believer. Discipline, and the ultimate sanction of withdrawing fellowship is for serious wrong behaviour or for serious wrong teaching, things that will damage the public testimony. But if an accusation is made against me, then I need to realise that the Lord Himself is part of the group making that accusation and I need to accept correction humbly.

In closing, two things should be said. First, this procedure really should not be necessary and represents gross failure, not that we should shy away from dealing with a situation should it arise for the sake of peace. Let me encourage myself to never act in such a way that forces others to have to resort to the inevitably painful necessity of exercising church discipline. Second, if I do act in such a way, then I need to humbly repent. Sadly, too many today just move local fellowship, fooling themselves that this solves anything. This is utterly wrong behaviour and leaves the Church as a whole weakened. Sin is not righteously dealt with by avoiding the consequences. But neither should we avoid taking these unpleasant steps for fear of someone leaving. The Lord’s honour is more important than the numbers in our congregations. Sin tolerated is the Spirit quenched. Let all of us therefore resolve to live in such a way that we are never the cause of church discipline becoming necessary. May each of us respond to the discipline of God in such a way that He is glorified and the public testimony strengthened.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on Discipline in the series “Truths that are out of fashion”, T1410.

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