

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

The Reverend Tasha L. Blackburn

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For Our Own Good

Hebrews 12: 7-13

We see it all the time. We hear it all the time. Whether it is in the grocery store or at a fast food restaurant or even in our own home, we've seen a child disobey and a mom or dad discipline them. The boy hits his sister and his mother tells him, "I'm sorry but now I have to take your favorite truck!" The boy grumbles, "Why do you always have to take a truck?" And the mom says back, "I will until you learn." Everywhere we see this scene played again and again. We even have memories of playing one or more of the roles in that scene ourselves!

Even when the child wonders why they have to be disciplined, no adult ever wonders. We discipline children because it is important. What seems like punishment to them is actually love for them and worry about them and the belief that there is so much better in them than we have, thus far, seen. For all these reasons and so many more we discipline children. It is for their own good which means that, across the generations, even as so many other things have changed, very little has changed about that moment between parent and child and, the thing is, we never really outgrow it. Even when our mom and dad are no longer with us, even then we have not outgrown it. It reminds me of the old joke about a phone booth that had a note taped to the inside door. It said, "If you are ready to give up sinning read John 3:16" and right below it someone had scribbled, "If you aren't ready to give up sinning call 555-1379." More often than we would like to admit we call the number rather than read the scripture! And we wonder why we need to be disciplined but, as the writer of Hebrews points out, we need to be disciplined by God for all those same reasons that children need discipline: because God loves us and worries about us and believes that there is so much better in us than we have, thus far, shown.

A caveat is probably needed here: scripture is not telling us that all suffering is discipline from God. Not at all! We all know that some suffering is senseless and random and of no purpose and no one's fault. It just is. That kind of suffering is not what this passage is concerned with. This passage is talking about the kind of suffering we do for our faith and for God; the kind of tests of life and faith we encounter because we are Christians and care about honor and integrity and caring for the outcast and stranger. We often speak of being a child of God and that relationship definitely has its benefits. The fruits of the Spirit encapsulate so many of those benefits. As children we get love and patience, kindness and joy, faithfulness and peace. And we also get discipline that can feel like suffering. While this sounds like a drawback to the whole "child of God" relationship let's be honest, really honest. When you look back over your life haven't you learned more during the difficult times, more about life and hope and endurance and grace, than you have in the easy times? We may not enjoy admitting it but so often, if it is too easy, we lose. And if it is hard, we gain.

Here is a really practical example that has been a part of my life. It sounds silly but I never learned to study. Elementary school, junior high: no studying. High school came and went and college: no studying. I never learned to study, even for my time in seminary. All I learned to do was cram. In the early years I didn't learn the skill of studying because school was easy. By high school and college and graduate school, even when coursework was difficult, I could make most things work by cramming for the test. As some of you know my husband and I lived in Edinburgh, Scotland for a year

and during that time we took coursework for a second master's degree. Our professors, on the first day of class, handed us packets of reading lists and dates when we would meet. I asked, "What books should I read and by when?" The answer was this: Read what you think you need to pass the tests and write your thesis and don't read what you don't think you need. Meaning: study. It was a disaster. I couldn't do it. I didn't know how. Because it had been easy for so many years I'd never gained the skills I needed and, in the end, ease was actually a loss. It would have been good to have been disciplined over time so that those important skills were there when I needed them.

That is how life and faith are: they cannot be crammed. We need disciplining over time. God wants to push us and pull us and discipline us—and a lot of it doesn't feel good—so that we can grow our faith over time and it will be there when we need it. If we have not felt that push and pull for awhile then this moment is a challenge to all that ease. For easy will not gain us much and God is demanding more from us than a life of ease. But when was the last time your faith asked something difficult of you? How long has it been since you knew your life as a Christian would keep you from a job promotion because it had been offered dishonestly? Or when did it last hit you that you really cannot maintain a relationship in your life because it leads you to a place that is mean or lazy or apathetic? How long has it been since you felt convicted by your credit card bill and all of the excess you've chosen to live with? God wants to discipline us in these areas of our lives, these and so many others; not so that we will suffer but so that we will grow in faith and into all that God knows we can be. May we feel this discipline each day as we live into the gift of being a child of God for, God knows, it is for our own good. Amen.