

“Discipline and More . . . ?”

Salado UMC—Preaching Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany Sunday—3 January 2021

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“That government is best which governs the least,
because its people discipline themselves”

(Thomas Jefferson—1743 - 1826).

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Hear the day’s lesson, Matthew 2:1-12:

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, **2** asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." **3** When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; **4** and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. **5** They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. "On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road (Matthew 2:1-12).

Many medical centers, shopping malls, and freestanding buildings have an area named “Wellness or Fitness Center” posted over the door. A fitness/wellness center is where extensive discipline occurs. Such enterprises have fitness as a primary purpose. These sites have telling names: “Curves,” “Body Works,” “Total Workout,” “Anytime Fitness,” “24 Hour Fitness,” “L A Fitness” and “Busy Bodies.” While most may sound like

names for auto repair, physical fitness regimens are as close as many people get to authentic discipline. Listen to Hebrews address discipline:

Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. [12] Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, [13] and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed (Hebrews 12:7, 11-13).

Hebrews is not trying to furnish a full-blown theological account of suffering, trials, or affliction. Rather, Hebrews attempts to place human suffering into a perspective. In fact, the writer employs the image of endurance to make the concept discipline clearer. Further, the writer uses an analogy of a parent's discipline of a child to emphasize God's discipline for believers. If we accept the discipline of our human parents, then how much more should we be subject to the discipline of God?

Naturally, discipline and the New Year seem closely linked in our minds. On this first Sabbath of a New Year, we surely affirm faith. There are, many ways to do this renewing. Some do it with resolutions, some make a mental note to do better, and some use a worship form like the "The Wesleyan Covenant [Service]."

Hebrews' statement about discipline is a classic Greek rhetorical argument of "the lesser to the greater," similar to a claim Jesus makes in Luke. Jesus asks rhetorically:

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (Luke 11:11-13)?

As parental discipline exists for but a short time, God intends divine discipline to endure so that we may share in God's holiness. Discipline always seems painful at the time, but later it yields righteousness as a fruit of discipline. The text's argument boils down to the assertion that discipline eventually leads to healing. We can all predict which mature adults will respond to rehabilitation and which ones will not. Those with willpower and discipline will prosper; those without, will not thrive.

No doubt, discipline involves pain, but as this text reminds its readers: "what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed (Hebrews 12:7-14). Thus, in the long run, the pain of discipline promotes good health in both the physical and the spiritual realms. Discipline is the ability an individual calls on to do what Stephen Covey suggests by the

phrase “putting first things first.” The first things are the things that promote health and wholeness in our lives. It is to this end that discipline aims.

But the self-mastery we urge on ourselves includes actions to which we are not naturally inclined. We call this inertia in physics. Inertia means that objects at rest tend to remain at rest until acted on by an outside force. When young, I could play basketball all day and have energy left. Yet, when my mother took me shopping for school clothes once a year, I was dead-legged after an hour.

On a family shopping trip, after walking only thirty minutes through several stores, I was dog-tired. So, I parked on a near bench. It felt good to sit. I could have sat there all day. Getting off that bench took major motivation—or discipline. Much of our lives are like this circumstance. We grow contented in sitting rather than getting up and doing something.

In terms of self-mastery, we require discipline to alter inertia—to get moving in a positive direction. Self-discipline is not a once in a lifetime heroic effort. Rather, discipline is a series of steady habits of doing the right things the right way. This particular condition is the heart of discipline. As M. Scott Peck writes, “Discipline is the basic set of tools we require to solve life’s problems” (*The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations*, W/JKP, Louisville, 2001, p. 77). We get off the bench and do something by letting discipline exert itself. Spiritual discipline is what believers do in God’s zone. Perhaps, this is why John Wesley often addressed the spiritual disciplines.

In Wesleyan “bands and classes” (small groups to foster spiritual disciplines) the question believers asked was: “How is it with your soul?” Mr. Wesley saw community as vital to the practice of spiritual disciplines. Among these spiritual disciplines: Bible study, prayer, worship, fasting, meditation, and works of service. Richard Foster described spiritual discipline like this: “The detachment from the confusion all around us is in order to have a richer attachment to God” (*Celebration of Discipline*, 2nd ed. [Harper, 1988], p.21).

A disciple is a learner. We learn from the disciplines we impose on ourselves—and for the less mature, from the discipline others impose on us—parents, or from the Hebrews’ passage—God. But could our discipline be from a law, or a policies and procedures manual, or even from promises we make to others? Each discipline mode helps us to become the person God wants us to be. But to begin, we need a community to encourage us into the spiritual disciplines.

In college, my roommate was an avid runner. He ran each morning. He thought it was a good health discipline—at least for the first month of college. Yet, soon he fell out of his good habit. At 6:30 one morning, another jogger knocked on our dorm door. My

roommate explained: “I could not get myself out of bed anymore, so my buddy promised he would come by and get me. Now I am back in the habit.”

Other people can help us get and keep disciplined. If we ever need a reminder of one of the foundational characteristics of abundant life, then remember a community that will help us with our “discipline.” Amen.

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