

“God Is Treating You as Sons”

In the name of him who set aside his divine glory and honor and gave himself over to suffering and death that we might be raised up as the children of God, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Those of you who know firsthand both the many joys and heartaches of raising children can attest to the truth that the skill of good parenting is something of an inexact science. I mean all parents *want* what's best for their children; that's only right and natural – the trouble is knowing what's best for their children at any given moment and for every particular situation. It's further complicated because what's best for one child in a given set of circumstances may actually be detrimental for another because of differences in that child's personality, abilities, aspirations, and temperament. Complicating things even more is that children keep changing as they mature. So, what's best for parents to do today for their child might very well not be so good for the same child tomorrow. So, I'm only saying what most of you already know: that being a good parent, besides requiring a lot of hard work, patience, and love, also involves a heavy dose of guesswork. You plunge ahead doing what you think is best – and hope and pray that everything comes out all right. And hopefully too you learn by your mistakes – for even the best parents make them.

But one of the biggest mistakes people who sincerely want to be good parents often make is to think that always giving their children exactly what they want is what's best for them. There's a television program I've watched a few times called *Honey, We're Killing the Kids*. They show it on one of those educational channels like Discovery or TLC. Has anyone seen it? If you're not familiar with it, what they do each episode is feature an American family that's got some serious problems – problems that are sadly very common in a lot of American homes. Namely that mom and dad are overworked and overstressed – and a big reason for that is they don't know how to manage their time and affairs very well. The upshot is that they never enjoy any quality family time with their children. And to compensate, at least to some degree, they try to keep the natives pacified by buying whatever they want and by feeding them with a steady stream of high calorie snacks like candy, potato chips, and soda pop. So, when Little Jonny starts to complain about something or throws a temper tantrum, they simply buy him another toy or stuff another Twinkie in his mouth to shut him up. There's never any time for a well-balanced, sit-down, home cooked meal. The families don't even know what that is. So instead they subsist mostly on fat-laden fast foods from burger joints and pizzerias – and usually each person consumes quantities that exceed by two or three times the maximum number of calories required for a healthy diet. Then, because there's really no social interaction or intellectual stimulation going on, the kids turn to the television and other techno-gadgets for entertainment. The only exercise they ever experience is what they get from twitching their thumbs playing video games. Typically, they have no household chores that they are responsible for because the parents—okay, mostly *mom* tries to convince herself that she is being a good mother by doing everything for her kids. Also, there's not much in the way of discipline going on because that creates ugly scenes that the peace seeking parents will do just about anything to avoid. Like I said before, they rule (if you can call it that) through a policy of appeasement. So, on the surface, it looks like everyone is getting what they want: the kids get the toys and sugar and fat loaded food they crave, and mom and dad get the peace and quiet they're after. You'd think they'd all be happy; but that is not the case. Instead the children are whiny, undisciplined, and dangerously overweight, and the parents are miserable, frustrated, and at a loss to know how to fix things.

Enter the show's trained experts who first observe to diagnose the problems, and then, over a three-week period, impose a series of new family rules designed to turn things around and get them on the right track. And since it is the heretofore overly passive and permissive parents who ultimately have to enforce all these rules, they use a rather brutal shock treatment to get them on board. They bring them into a studio and project on the screen before them five times larger than life picture of each of their children in succession. Then, using computer aging models that take into consideration all the unhealthy factors of their current lifestyles, they show the parents what their kids are projected to look like from the present until they are forty years old. The parents then stare into the unhappy, bloated faces the strangers before them and are told, “This is what you are creating. This is what you are doing to your children.” It's usually all the motivation they need.

So then in a flurry of activity the family's home is purged from top to bottom of all the snacks and junk food. They bring in a dietician to teach the family how to prepare healthy meals and eat right. Stringent time limits are set on watching television and playing video games. The whole family begins a regimen of exercise under the direction of a fitness coach. Time is set aside for whole family activities. The parents learn to assign household chores and responsibilities to their children. They also learn how to employ effective means of discipline when the rules are violated. The latter becomes necessary immediately because it's all so new to the children. It's a real shock to their systems that their parents are actually behaving like parents. They're used to getting their own way. So, especially at first, mom and dad face stubborn resistance and a lot of weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth as the children try all their old tactics of manipulation to turn things back their way. It soon becomes a contest of wills.

And here's what it is: in some episodes you see slight glimmers of hope. Maybe the changes are going to take hold. Certainly, the show's hosts try to be optimistic. But in most episodes I've seen, it's pretty apparent that the improvements are not going to last. Mom and dad may mean well; but they haven't got the determination and willpower to go the long haul. They're lax and inconsistent in their enforcement of the new rules. They allow exceptions. Sometimes when they see blatant violations they look the other way to avoid conflict. As a couple they allow themselves to be divided and conquered. They may even secretly break the rules themselves – at least, they think they're doing it secretly. Kids are amazingly quick to spot a phony or a double standard – and to capitalize on it to their advantage. In these cases, and I think it's most of them, the show's title is especially apt. By caving in and refusing to do the hard work of enforcing discipline, these parents really are killing their kids. Ironically, I'm sure they would say that it's their love for their children that causes them to behave in the indulgent way they do; when in truth, if they really loved their children, they would stick with the program and tighten the screws.

Now, the reason I mention all of this is not to encourage you to watch more television programs like these or to make you feel guilty about your own family's less than healthy habits. Lord knows I'm no dietician, fitness expert, or trained family dynamics counselor. If you feel you need a lot of help in those areas, call the show. Maybe they'll do an episode featuring you. That would be fun to watch – and who knows? Maybe some pastor like me would talk about your family one fine Sunday morning. But no, the reason I bring this up (while thanking the individual who suggested the illustration) is to help us all appreciate so much more what the Lord God is doing with us on a day to day basis, and how he applies discipline in a *truly* loving way to help us mature into the kind of complete Christians he wants us to be.

I mean, can you imagine what your spiritual self would look like if you always got exactly what thought you wanted? Why, you would never have had any stress, never experienced any conflict, hardship, or sorrowful loss. You'd have been able to stuff your soul freely with the spiritual equivalent of junk food, and so would have never developed a taste for healthier, deeper, and more substantial theological study. You would never have had to face a challenge to your faith – never had any reason to exercise it or make it grow strong. You would never have had to learn spiritual disciplines like prayer or struggling with temptation. You wouldn't be held responsible for anything, so you would have never learned to confess your sins, or to appreciate God's forgiveness and the gifts he gives through the sacraments. You would never have learned to participate sacrificially in the life of the church through the giving of your time, talents, and other resources. Why, if God gave you everything you really wanted you would be, in a spiritual sense, just one thing: you'd be dead. He would have killed you.

Fortunately for our sakes God is our Father in heaven who loves us very much – more than we can possibly imagine. He wants us to live – *really live* as his holy children now in time and with him forever in eternity. And unlike human parents who sometimes make mistakes or who wrongly believe that love is best shown through indulgence and non-judgmental affirmation of whatever choices we make, our heavenly Father shows us his love by imposing upon us the discipline that he in his infinite wisdom and unfailing judgment knows is for our ultimate good. This is precisely what we heard in today's Epistle reading: "*the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.*" And the thing to understand here is that earthly parents are limited not only in their *understanding* of what's best for their children; but also, in the means they have available to give their children what's best and the discipline they need. The Lord has no such limitations. He performs his good and gracious will for us in all things and at all times. What that means is

that *everything* that happens to us that we find sorrowful or painful or difficult or in any way at all unpleasant—that’s a means by which the Lord is applying some kind of discipline that he knows is for our good.

So, in view of that, what the writer of Hebrews is suggesting is that you change your attitude about such things. When some kind of hardship befalls you – whatever form it takes – instead of complaining bitterly, moping about, and thinking, “Oh, why is God doing this to me? How could he allow this to happen?” you should rather be encouraged by it because it’s a tangible confirmation of his love for you. Not that that’s going to make it any less difficult to endure – as he says, “all discipline is painful for the moment”; but rather that you should be more willing to accept it and humble yourself under God’s mighty hand because you know that what he’s doing is for the purpose of bringing forth from you the harvest of righteousness that will be your crown of glory in all eternity.

And I hasten to add that this change of attitude over the hardships and trials you endure applies especially when you don’t understand what good your Father could possibly be intending to achieve by them. The point is that you don’t have to understand. It’s sufficient to know that he understands what he’s doing and why. Your part is to trust that he loves you dearly and that he’s doing it for your good. If you’ll allow me another illustration, I’ll bet most of you may remember a 1980s film called *The Karate Kid*. In it a bullied teenager wants to learn karate so that he can defend himself against his many attackers. The kindly and yet enigmatic Mr. Miagi agrees to teach him; but only if the kid promises to do whatever he’s told. The boy eagerly makes this promise, and at once Mr. Miagi puts him to work: waxing his cars, painting his fence, painting his house, and sanding his large wooden deck. It’s long, hard work; and the boy labors all alone. Once in a while Mr. Miagi comes out and issues corrections about exactly how the boy is to paint or wax or sand. He’s really picky. It has to be done just so. Finally, after a week or so of this abuse the kid can take it no longer. “You said you’d teach me karate!” he complains. “All you’ve got me doing is working as your slave!” It’s then that the old master reveals to the boy what he’s really learned. It turns out that the purpose of all that repetitious toil was to ingrain in him the basic karate defensive moves needed to block the blows of an opponent. He had been learning karate—he just didn’t know it.

Our Father in heaven works in similar ways with us. A good biblical example is the story of Joseph. You remember how he was hated by his brothers, and how they sold him to slave traders headed for Egypt. There Joseph spends seven years as a slave in the house of an Egyptian official. His master sees that he serves well, so he promotes Joseph to manage his whole household. Through Joseph’s work the master becomes quite rich. But then Joseph is falsely accused of a crime. He spends the next seven years in a dreadful prison. There the jailer marks him as an asset and puts him to work managing the prison’s meager resources. And though we are never told what Joseph was thinking, I have to believe there were times when he asked, “Why? Why do all these horrible things keep happening to me? Why does God allow it?” We find out later in the story. After interpreting the Pharaoh’s dreams, Joseph is raised up to be the business manager of the entire nation. Seven years of managing a household in times of prosperity prepared him to wisely rule all of Egypt in the seven years of plenty, while his time in the prison have taught him how to carefully distribute the nations’ resources in the seven years of famine that follow. More importantly his suffering has taught him compassion for those who are suffering. Having been without has taught him to be grateful and more generous with what he has. Having been sinned against repeatedly and having been falsely accused have given him opportunity to practice the virtues of forgiveness and patience. Having been hated has taught him the importance of showing love. And most importantly, in summary, having been humbled and abused and treated as was our Savior has taught him to be more like our Savior – which is, of course, God’s ultimate goal for all of us: to conform us to the image of his Son.

And that’s why we sang a short while ago, “I leave all things to God’s direction, for he loves me in wealth and woe”. That’s absolutely true whether we believe it or not – but when we do believe and firmly trust that unchanging and indeed unchangeable truth we are better able to see past our “light and momentary” difficulties of the present to the greater goal the Lord intends for us: to make us like Jesus. And that’s what motivates us to do exactly what the writer of Hebrews says, to “Lift our drooping hands and strengthen our weak knees and make straight paths for our feet” when we are under the Lord’s discipline. We can march ahead confidently under any adverse circumstances because we know that by them God is treating us as the Son he loves and whom he gave to save us from our sin. Let’s pray that he may bring his gracious work to completion in each of us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!