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STORIES FROM THE VINEYARD

Part 2 – Chastisement

I am following Bruce Wilkinson's teaching in his book, Secrets of the Vine, and last month's teaching was titled, "The Purpose of our Life." Jesus explained that purpose to His disciples during His last night on earth by using the analogy of a grapevine, a vinedresser, and a harvest of grapes. This teaching is found in the Gospel of John, chapter 15. Jesus said that the purpose of our lives is to bear fruit for God, and fruit, according to the Bible, is "good works." NOTE: We are saved **by** grace through believing in Jesus Christ, and we are saved **for** good works which bring glory to God. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

INNER FRUIT is when we allow God to bring forth in us the very character of Christ, which is the fruit of the Spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control. OUTWARD FRUIT is when we allow God to work through us to bring Him glory, and this can happen in every area of our lives: family, career, friendships, special ministries, hobbies, travels, Facebook, etc.

As recorded in John 15, Jesus carefully explained to His first disciples, and to us, that: *1. Jesus is the vine. 2. The Father is the vinedresser. 3. You and I are branches.* Jesus shows us that the Father looks for fruit (good works) in our lives, and He sees that we are producing:

- Basket 1 - "no fruit"
- Basket 2 - "fruit"
- Basket 3 - "more fruit"
- Basket 4 - "much fruit"

Friends: Bearing much fruit is not reserved for missionaries and "full-time Christian workers." It is the desire of the Father that every one of His branches bears much fruit, so He personally oversees each life in two ways.

Number One: Discipline, The Good Hurt

Discipline, or chastisement, is what happens when our loving Father steps in to lift us away from our sins, our destructive and unfruitful ways. *As a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you.* (Deut. 8:5) Our fallen nature remains even after we become Christians, and all of us sin every day in our thoughts, words, or deeds. But normally God's discipline starts because of a major sin problem that we are refusing to acknowledge and deal with. It ends when the behavior ends. Is discipline painful? Absolutely. Then how could a loving God cause it?

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. (Hebrews 12:5-6) So we learn important principles from these verses:

- God is the source of the discipline,
- He disciplines all believers, and
- He always acts out of love.

A parent knows how it works. You have repeatedly told Tyrone, your fearless five-year-old, that he's not allowed to go into the street. But when his favorite ball rolls into the street, he ignores the rule. So you step in. Since your words haven't registered, maybe it's time to make him sit in the corner and repeat, fifty times: "I'm not allowed to go into the street." Or take away his prize ball. (While we modern Americans may consider applying a switch or belt as being off-limits, God is apparently not that constrained, He *scourges every son He receives*.) God never disciplines us out of rage or selfishness, and He never loses control. *God disciplines us for our good.* (Hebrews 10:9)

IT'S ALL UP TO YOU

Please note this truth: *The discipline doesn't have to continue! It's all up to me. I will only experience pain as long as I hang on to my sin.* Well, how severe could a loving God's discipline be to His children? You might be surprised. God's children, Christians, can suffer from fatigue, illness, and even death because of long-term, unheeded discipline.

THREE DEGREES OF INTERVENTION

In Hebrews 12, we find three degrees of God's intervention:

Degree 1: Rebuke – My son, do not ...be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him. (vs. 5)

A rebuke is a verbal warning. Perhaps when you were a child, your mother raised her eyebrows or lifted an index finger into the air when you crossed a certain line. If you did not heed this gentle correction, your father might say your name, calmly and deliberately, "Bruce!" Their looks and words were meant to spare you further pain.

God can make Himself heard in many ways: a prick of our conscience, a timely word from another person, a Scripture, the preaching of God's Word, a dream or vision, a vivid experience that speaks to you. We should always have our ears open for these "words" from God. If, however, we harden our heart and close our ears, we force our Father to intensify the correction.

Degree 2: Chasten - - For whom the Lord loves He chastens. (vs. 5)

Chastening is something you feel as emotional anxiety, frustration, or distress. What used to bring you joy now doesn't. Pressures increase at work, at home, in your health or finances. You can't fall to sleep, and you lay awake feeling worried, stressed and estranged from God and loved ones. Many Christians bump along in this level of discipline, yet fail to read the signs. They feel unfulfilled at church, critical of their Christian friends, and "on the outs" with God. The Bible no longer speaks to them, and prayer is a burden. If any of these symptoms sound familiar, you need to get alone with God and ask him some serious questions about your life. If you don't respond, love will compel your Father to take more drastic measures.

Degree 3: Scourge – And scourges every son whom He receives. (vs. 6)

Scourge is the same word the Gospels use to describe what the Romans did to Jesus just before they crucified Him. To scourge is to whip, to cause excruciating pain.

What percentage of Christians do you think have experienced scourging? The Bible says that God scourges "every son." That means you have most likely already been scourged in your Christian life. At this level of discipline you are living in open sin with a flagrant disregard for what you know is right. Therefore, God must resort to intense pain to bring you to your senses. God takes long-term sin very seriously, and He will act.

Paul noted that the Corinthians were participating in or ignoring some drastic sins in their church, yet participating in Communion as if everything was fine. He said that their acts brought judgment to themselves: *That is why many of you are weak and sick, and some have even died.* (1 Cor. 11:30) This happened in a New Testament church like yours or mine.

(Note from Glenn: Some preachers declare, "Oh, God would never make someone sick or cause them to die if they were Christians!" Consider: Unforgiveness, bitterness and anger are acknowledged by many in the medical community as a leading cause, perhaps the leading cause, of stress, hypertension, heart attacks, strokes, auto-immune disease, etc. Also consider: Do drugs and alcohol and smoking cause any physical or emotional problems? How about sexual sin? How about self-hatred?

And what is the difference if we say, "God is chastening someone," or if we say, "God has so created the world that there are consequences for our actions?" So we Christians can force God's hand of correction. We can and will inevitably reap the consequences of our actions. We can find ourselves in a prison of addiction, fear, bitterness, depression, sickness. We

can even find ourselves in a literal prison because we will not heed God's loving correction. Many times, men in prison have said to me, "God was trying to get my attention for years, and I would not listen. I believe that being sentenced to prison saved my life and saved my soul."

But please note: This is NOT to say that every sickness, pain or death is caused by sin! Not, not, not! But it is to say that some are.)

LYING WORDS THAT JUSTIFY OUR CONTINUING TO SIN

I (Bruce) have met thousands of Christians who have been held captive by lying beliefs for years. Do you recognize yourself in any of these misguided voices:

- "The pain and bad circumstances in my life are the results of fate. They are not connected to my choices."
- "If God does discipline me somehow, it would probably be a one-time deal. He is much too forgiving to impose escalating consequences just to stop me from sinning."
- "I will be honest. The enjoyment I get from my so-called sin (my sexual habits or addictions) outweighs any spiritual benefit I would get from stopping. Anyway, my sins aren't really hurting anybody."
- "I simply can't help myself. This problem goes back to my childhood. God understands why I am the way I am."
- "Just because I sin doesn't mean I can't be an effective follower of Christ and do many good things for Him." (See the end of Matthew 7 where Jesus says, Many call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do many works in my name, and I will say to them, 'Depart from me, you who break God's laws.')
- "It's not a sin. It's just a weakness, part of my personality, something I struggle with."

THE JOYFUL TURNING

God wants us to wholeheartedly turn away from the sin and denial that is destroying us and turn to Him. He waits with outstretched arms. The Bible word for this hope-filled change of direction is *repentance*.

Repentance is not a one-time act. (Note the number of times that Christ tells the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 to repent.) It is a lifestyle, an ongoing commitment to keep putting aside our rebellion and receive God's forgiveness. Some sins leave us in such a weak and broken condition that we need ongoing help and accountability. Those who have overcome serious addictions understand the struggle and pain involved in this process.

In the next chapter we will discover the secret of moving from "fruit" to "more fruit" through the adventure (Ha!) of "pruning."

LOVE AND SACRIFICE AND SUFFERING

I have puzzled a lot over the years about why God has put us in a world where there is so much pain and suffering. You can readily see the necessity of pain and suffering in the teaching above about bearing fruit, which involves chastisement and pruning. Beyond that, let me share a few obvious reflections:

- The Bible reveals that when Adam ("man" in Hebrew) sinned, it introduced pain, suffering, and death.
- Adam and Eve's sin brought God's curse (Genesis 3). There is a curse on man's work (*the ground will bring forth thorns and thistles*), the very place where men get their fulfillment and identity. ("Nice to meet you, Joe. And what do you do?") And God cursed women's relationships with husband and children (*he will rule over you.....and in pain you will bring forth children*). Relationships are the primary place where women get their fulfillment and identity. (Nice to meet you, Mary. Tell me about your family.")

(In an inspired revelation, John Eldredge explains why God cursed the very things that men and women treasure the most: Because God created us for Himself, He will not allow our jobs and families to become idols that take first place in our hearts. If you have a great career that brings you riches and admiration; and if you have the most perfect Beaver Cleaver family in town - - but you die and go to hell, and your children die and go to hell, is that a win?

- God has designed the world so that love and sacrifice and suffering are inseparable. When a young couple, Horace and Beatrice, fall in lust with one another, they usually don't have a clue what "love" is. They have lived selfish, self-centered lives, and they may think that the handsome/beautiful person they are attracted to has been sent by providence to provide for their every sexual, financial, and emotional need. Annnnn! Beatrice or Horace may be thinking the same thing.

- In the course of time, a little mammal is born to Beatrice. The couple thought they had learned a lot about love and sacrifice in adjusting to one another. They had no idea! Little Oholibamah (they picked a Biblical name, Gen. 36:2) is a beautiful little girl, but she is pretty demanding. When she needs to eat or drink or burp, or when she gets cold or hot or scared or lonely or bored, or when she needs her diaper changed, she wants it done NOW! And 2:00 AM means nothing to her. Mommy and Daddy's feelings or work schedule mean nothing to her. And if Mommy and Daddy hear Oholibamah crying, and they lie in bed thinking, "Oh, our precious baby is awake. I love her so much. She is such a darling baby." And they cover their ears with a pillow and go back to sleep, that is not love. The feeling, the sentiment of love is not what the Bible describes as love. There is no such thing as love (agape, the Christ kind of love), without sacrifice and suffering.

- But if Horace and Beatrice love their little girl the way most parents do, they never focus on the sacrifice, they are not thinking of themselves at all, but they are focused on their precious little daughter.

- And so for a woman who gives birth: *She no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.* (John 16:21)

- And, *If a brother or sister is naked and hungry and you say to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' and don't give them the things they need, that is not faith...* and it is not love. (James 2:14-17)

- And if we say we love God and trust God but we refuse to obey God, we are told again and again in the little book of 1 John, we are deceiving ourselves. If, for instance, we who live in one of the most blessed nations in history refuse to give even 10% of our income to the work of the Lord, we will live under a curse according to Malachi 4. (Not that God curses us, but the consequences of our greed and disobedience will inevitably work out in our lives so that we do not become the kind of Christlike, generous, persons that God desires for us to be.) I believe that our giving to God must be a sacrifice, it must cost us something, if it is going to truly bless us with Christlike character.

- One of John Wimber's aphorisms: "A selfish, greedy Christian is an oxymoron."

- God's purpose for the human race is that we return to the "image of God" in which we were originally created in Genesis 1:27. That means to become Christlike. That cannot happen in the Garden of Eden - - which was closed to man when he rebelled against his Creator. It cannot happen on the mountain tops of high spiritual experiences. It can only happen in the valley, the wilderness, of temptation, testing, sacrifice and suffering. Think of the suffering of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, the prophets, the disciples.

- Thus, the highest example of agape love is the pure expression of sacrifice and suffering in our Savior's experience of the cross. *Looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of God.* (Hebrews 12:2) The "joy set before Him," I believe, was the joy of pleasing His Father by sacrificing Himself to rescue the many lost souls who would come to Him by faith. I believe that as Jesus went to the cross, He saw your face and my face, and He was filled with joy.

KENDA'S STORY

One night on Christian television they showed a testimony by a handsome African lady named Kenda. (By "handsome," I don't mean that she was masculine or not beautiful, I mean that her face was strong, kind, and mature.) Her testimony was brief but so clearly demonstrated what Christ does in a person's life that I made a note for my file:

"I lived like everybody else in my village. I drank alcohol all the time. I got drunk all the time. I went to the bars and clubs all the time. I lived in fornication all the time.

Then one day there was a huge meeting in a field near my village. I went to see what it was about, and they talked about Jesus. I felt something good come into me, and it changed me.

I stopped going to bars and clubs. I stopped drinking and getting drunk. I stopped living in fornication.

Now I have a husband. I have three children. I love God, and I know He loves me. I obey God. He helps me."

WHY SELF-PITY IS A DESTROYER

Do you look at some things that have happened in your life and think, "Life is unfair!" Well, duh! If you focus on those things, you will start with the self-pity, and that is dangerous. It is dangerous because:

- It gives us the right to a victim mentality and an attitude of entitlement.
- When we focus on, "Life is unfair," we can start thinking, "God is unfair." If we are blaming God, that is the opposite of loving God, and we cannot then expect our lives to be blessed.
- Whiners are miserable, unhappy people. They drive away family and friends. Remember the Israelites who whined away their lives for 40 years and died in the wilderness. (Scary story!)
- Poor little me has the right to comfort myself with booze, drugs, food, anger and bitterness.
- It is the opposite of a spirit of THANKSGIVING, which should be our constant attitude and is the antidote for self-pity.

God Bless

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