

The LORD'S Pruning

¶ *The young tree, its trunk not quite stiff, arches gracefully in the wind. Its slender branches spread upward, and hints of blossoms peek out among the tender leaves. It basks in the warmth of the sunshine, revelling in the strength it receives from the sun's rays. Suddenly, a crack rips the air as a pair of sharp clippers snap off the tip of a branch. The clippers reach for yet another appendage, this time cutting deeper and taking off almost one-third of the branch. The gardener continues on with his job until a significant amount*

of withered leaves lie on the ground and most of its branches end in stumps.

As the satisfied gardener walks away, he is confident that, come spring, the tree will produce more leaves and blossoms. Perhaps, even some fruits.

Presently, however, the tree slumps a bit, for the garland of leaves no longer crowns its head and blossoms cease to adorn it. It sits in silence; it does not understand... ¶

At first look, the act of a gardener's pruning defies logic. Why would you cut what you want to grow, or strip what you want to flourish? However, the gardener in his wisdom cuts off the unwanted parts of the tree - the decaying leaves, a mouldy

branch, and even some "good" parts to make it appear neater. The gardener foresees the greater potential of the tree - a thriving, strong and rooted tree. And he accomplishes this in part by pruning.

In the same way, the Lord foresees our potential to become objects of grace, beauty and, ultimately, perfection. Our Lord Jesus has said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). This is not a lofty ideal that the Lord has set for us to gaze wistfully upon; it is a direct command. Since it is so, the Lord has given us the means to accomplish it, and He will help by "pruning" us. He is the gardener who cuts off every branch "that bears no fruit...and every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will bear more fruit" (Jn 15:1-2).

"Self-Pruning"

The Lord's pruning may come in various forms, one of which is "self-pruning." The Lord has equipped us well with the tools to prune ourselves. His Word and the Holy Spirit are effective devices which we can use. Through His Word, we can see a clear reflection of ourselves. It

helps us to understand which areas need to be cut off and which need more care. The author of Hebrews describes the word of God as "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12).

In addition, the Holy Spirit gives us the strength to look in this spiritual mirror and to correct ourselves. Paul understood the power of the Holy Spirit, saying, "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control" (2 Tim 1:7). The Holy Spirit residing in us is not a dormant being; He is not an inert "ticket" we keep in our pockets until the day we reach the heavenly gates. The Holy Spirit is God's own life-changing, life-giving Spirit if we choose to let Him fill us, teach us and change us.

"God's Pruning"

If we fail to use these God-given tools to prune ourselves, pruning may come in other ways - namely by God's own hand. God may use a sudden turn of events in our lives - sickness, natural disaster, loss of a job, etc.- to remind us that we are not on the right track. Jonah, who was swallowed by a big fish as a direct result of disobedience, is a classic example of this fact. Three days and three nights in the belly of the fish effectively changed his attitude.

“Peer-Pruning”

Sometimes, however, God’s discipline is not always as obvious as being swallowed by a fish. In fact, God’s discipline often comes in ways we would never expect - through the people around us. We often overlook this type of “peer-pruning”. This kind of pruning is the hardest to recognise and to accept. It is easy to accept chastisement from God above, or we may choose to better ourselves - but discipline from our peers? Chastisement from the people around us? That may be a different story altogether.



Can we see the Lord’s discipline in a parent’s rebuke, or in a suggestion given by a church brother or sister? To take it one step further, can we accept the harsh words or criticism given by someone whom we don’t particularly like or respect? We are often blind to the possibility that God

may be using the people around us to correct, mold and discipline us. “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another” (Prov 27:17).

One of the greatest and most obvious obstacles to accepting “peer-discipline” is pride. This self-defence mechanism, which

exists in all of us, protects us from hurt and wounded egos. So the first and most natural reaction when confronted with wrongdoing is often denial, either to others or to ourselves: “No, I didn’t mean that...” or “You don’t understand...” Another immediate reaction could be blame: “He pushed me to it. If he weren’t so annoying...” or “I was under a lot of stress at that time. I wasn’t myself...” We look everywhere and to everyone for the cause of this surely displaced criticism. But seldom do we look in the mirror.

“Peer-Pruning”- An Example

Although it may not be the most obvious type of discipline, the effects of “peer-discipline” can be great. It was peer-pruning that awakened David to his grave sins of adultery and murder. From his example, we can learn to recognise peer-discipline, to accept and to change our lives so that we may be more pleasing to the Lord.

After securing his kinship, David’s faith slowly began to decline. No longer fighting the Lord’s battles, he lived an idyllic life of luxury, lounging on his bed until sunset and taking strolls on his roof. His decline in faith culminated in adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah. At this time, God used Nathan to confront David with his serious sins.

After Nathan told David the parable of a rich man who stole a poor neighbour's only cherished ewe lamb, David still did not recognise himself as the offender. In fact, he wanted to put the rich man to death. He did not recognise the Lord's discipline through Nathan's words. Many of us, like David, are oblivious to our own sin. We often pick at the specks in others' eyes, while we ourselves have enough planks in our own to build our small raft.

When Nathan saw that David still did not understand the parable, he bluntly said to David, "You are the man!"

Let us now note David's extraordinary reaction. David did not deny, nor did he blame and make excuses. The words of Nathan pierced David's conscience and these heartfelt words left his mouth: "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam 12:1 - 13)

If we remember, David had a lifetime of experiences in the Lord. He exhibited his faith in God as a youth by killing Goliath. He composed the psalm that proclaims, "The Lord keeps me in the palms of his hand." He displayed his righteousness by refusing to kill King Saul. And now, God had made David king over all Israel.

However, David did not use his past righteousness or his current position as a badge of pride. Instead, in humility and repentance, David accepted the harsh words of correction which he knew to be true.

Very few of us today can accept peer-discipline as David did. Many times, a correction must pierce through layers of pride, blame and excuses before it reaches our heart. We hold on to the righteous deeds we did in the past, or our current positions in church or society. However, past deeds and current positions do not guarantee righteousness; neither do they absolve from sin. All too often, we adeptly fling away all seeds of instruction before they have a chance to reach our hearts and grow.

David accepted this seed of instruction, and it grew immediately into a heart of repentance. Seeing David's sincere heart, the Lord immediately forgave. Nathan said, "The Lord has taken away your sin." In the same way, God promise to forgive our sins if we ask. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9)

All this time, David composed Psalm 51 expressing his deepest thoughts and prayers to God. David states, "The sacrifice acceptable to god is broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Ps 51:17). David must have experienced the natural reaction of shame and contrition, as so many of us do when

confronted with correction. These feelings often paved the way to repentance, which ultimately leads to forgiveness.

Psalms 51 illustrates how David dealt with these feelings of sin and shame constructively. He asked the Lord to purge and wash him, to create in him a clean heart, to restore to him the joy of salvation. He asked the Lord to uphold him with His generous Spirit, to deliver him from guilt, and to open his lips to show forth his praise (Ps 51:7-16). While his son was on the brink of death, David fasted and wept for him. After his son died, however, David got up, washed and anointed himself, worshiped the Lord and ate. David did not dwell on his sin; he went on with his life and forgave himself.

Though God has forgiven us, we may still have to suffer the immediate and long-term consequences of our sin. The immediate consequence of David's sin was the death in his family. The long-term effect was that murder would be a constant threat to his family, his household would rebel against him and his wives would be given to another in public view (2 Sam 12:10-11). Despite the serious consequences of David's sin, God's grace was still manifested in his life. He gave him a second child from Bathsheba named Solomon, or Jedidiah, which means "loved by God." This son may have been a sign to David that, despite his past sin, God still loved him.

We, too, may have to suffer the immediate or long-term consequences of our sin, but that does not mean that God no longer loves us and has not forgiven us. God never gives up on us, as the father in the parable never gave up on his prodigal son. God does not expect us to be perfect tomorrow, but He does want us to improve. He is longsuffering and compassionate toward us, "not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). We can be sure that God disciplines us and prunes us because He deems us His precious children (Heb 12:7-11).

So let us cherish the Lord's pruning, for after His work is done, we will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. We will not fear when heat comes, our leaves will always be green. We will have no worries in the year of the drought and we will never fail to bear fruit (Jer 17:7-8). Blessed is he who heeds discipline, for "he who heeds instruction is on the path to life" (Prov 10:17).

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