

Our Wesleyan Heritage After Two Centuries

PAUL STROMBERG REES

III

Are We Weak At the Point of Discipline ?

'Disciple' and 'discipline' are words which come from the same root. In Matthew 13:52 we hear Jesus saying: "Every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an house-holder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old." So reads the Authorized Version; but if you will consult other versions, you will discover that the word 'instructed' is the same word that is elsewhere translated 'disciple'. "Every scribe who has been made a disciple to the kingdom of heaven," is the rendering of the American Standard Version. Weymouth uses an expression that is very similar to the language of our text: "Every scribe *well-trained* for the Kingdom of the Heavens." In other words, disciplined to the Kingdom!

Moffatt has a vivid translation of Titus 2:11-14: "For the grace of God has appeared to save all men, and it schools us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions and to live a life of self-mastery, of integrity, and of godliness in this present world, awaiting the blessed hope of the appearance of the Glory of the great God and of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who gave himself up for us to redeem us from all iniquity and secure himself a clean people, with a zest for good deeds." "The grace of God *schools* us," says Paul. In other words, it disciplines us.

I

Consider *the Place of discipline in the Gospel*. Most of us Protestant Christians are too much afraid of this line of truth.

We think it smacks of Catholicism—taking orders from the Pope or the priest, doing the Rosary, denying oneself meat on Friday, and all that sort of thing. We need to be told that our fear is both unnecessary and unwise. The life of grace and the life of discipline are not opposed to each other; they rather blend with each other. What we face here is really the old, old question of faith and works. On the one hand, it is Paul saying, "By grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God," while James, on the other hand, declares, "Faith without works is dead." That is to say, good works are not the *foundation* of our salvation, but they are the *fruit* of it. Let us be good Protestants and say, We cannot save ourselves by discipline. But, having said that, let us be good Christians and go on to say, We cannot make our salvation effective, either in character or in service, unless we lead disciplined lives.

All of this is clearly to be seen if we give a careful reading to the passage just quoted. Grace is set forth as a crown jewel with many facets. It is analyzed for us with skill and thoroughness. Let us look at it:

First: *the Disclosure of Grace*—"the grace of God hath appeared."

Second: *the Deliverance of Grace*—"the grace of God that bringeth salvation." ("Has displayed itself with healing power to all mankind," so Weymouth).

Third: *the Discipline of Grace*—"And it schools us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions and to live a life of self-mastery, of integrity, and of piety."

Fourth: *the Dynamic of Grace*—it is twofold: (1) *the Dynamic of Personal Help*—"the great God and our Saviour gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify (us) unto himself." (2) *the Dynamic of Personal Hope*—"looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of . . . our Saviour."

Fifth: *the Distinction of Grace*: its effect is to produce "a peculiar people zealous of good works."

If we will keep that order of things in mind, realizing that deliverance comes before discipline, we shall not fall into error. The grace of God *saves* us. And then the grace of God *schoools* us. It is the schooling that claims our attention in this hour.

II

Consider, next, *the Place of discipline in holy living*. To the Christians of the first century Paul sends this vital and vigorous word: Remember, says he, that the grace of God disciplines us "to renounce irreligion and worldly passions and to live a life of self-mastery, of integrity and of piety." We are to do two things: "to renounce," and "to live a life"; to be negative and to be positive; to deny and to develop; to give up and to take on; to repudiate and to realize.

It must begin, of course, with individuals. On the negative side let them watch against the forces of irreligion. Irreligion! Perhaps, to most of us, this suggests atheism and blasphemy. We are not tempted to fall for these follies. But is this all that the term 'irreligion' suggests? I am sure it is not. The devil is not so stupid. The materialism and secularism of our day are not most dangerous when they cry the wares of bold atheism. They are most to be feared when they appear to have no quarrel with religion, when indeed they work under the cloak and cover of religious conventionality, but insist nevertheless on claiming the chief loyalties of the soul for the false gods of wealth and pleasure and fame. Watch against *that*, Paul would say, with all prayerful diligence and with all righteous alertness.

In a notable sermon entitled "What Is Worldliness?" John Henry Jowett says, "Here (for example) is a man who has gone into business as a disciple of Jesus, with lofty hopes and aspirations." Jowett then describes how easily that man, if he does not discipline himself, will fall for the "irreligion" of dishonesty: "First he called the doings of the place dishonest; then he called them sharp practice; then he called them a little shady; then he said it was rather close sailing; then he styled it clever; then he laughed at the success of a vile trick; then he touched the pitch, and, thinking all the time that it was with one finger, he was presently besmeared all over." Who among us that has lived very long has not seen that deadly process go on in men's lives? Renounce it, cries Paul, in Christ's holy name, and keep on renouncing it.

And then there are "worldly passions." Watch against them. Psychologists today talk much about the primary forces that give impulse to human behavior. They frequently speak of them as "drives," or instincts. They are those basic urges that we name hunger and sex and fear. They are closely associated with the sentiments of life, such as love and hate, acquisitiveness and pride, pity, and patriotism. From the Christian point of view these God-given appetites and impulses have been perverted by sin. In some way that remains mysterious we have a tainted moral inheritance as well as a twisted physical inheritance.

Hunger is not sin, but gluttony and intemperance *are*. Sex is not sin, but unchastity and adultery *are*. The desire to possess something is not sin, but covetousness, theft, and dishonesty *are*. Combative-ness is not sin, but assault and murder *are*. Self-regard, even self-love, is not sin, but vanity and luxurious self-display *are*. That side of salvation which we know as sanctification deals with these clamorous instincts by cleansing and controlling them, through the inworking of the Holy Spirit. Always, however, and to the end of our days we shall need to lead disciplined lives with respect to these appetites and passions. The love of Christ will be the organizing

center around which our lives will gather, and this will mean inward harmony and outward victory, but it will mean this only as we follow St. Paul and "keep under" the body.

On the positive side our scripture speaks of the discipline of *self-mastery* of *integrity*, and of *piety*. Self-mastery cannot be had without honesty, and honesty cannot be had without piety.

Our most vexing problems are those that arise within ourselves. They are personality problems. Honest Martin Luther, when asked about the trouble he was having with the Pope, said, "My greatest trouble is with a pope named Martin Luther." This being the case, it should interest us to know that the Bible and modern psychology agree in telling us that the only hope of getting at the solutions of our problems is to stop making excuses for ourselves, end the miserable business of evasion, cease blaming our troubles and failures on others. In other words: Be honest. One of our psychologists puts it thus: "To be frank and honest in all relations, but especially in relation to oneself, is the first law of mental hygiene." So! The discipline of integrity is required for the discipline of self-mastery.

Remembering now that we are speaking of those who have received the grace of God and who should therefore be living lives of self-control, let me ask you to read the first ten verses of the chapter from which our scripture is taken. See if the leading thought throughout that paragraph is not self-mastery. Mark the strong stress that is laid upon maintaining the virtues of holiness: sobriety, love, patience, chastity, and truthfulness.

Then remember, as E. Stanley Jones points out, that psychologists today are pretty well agreed that the four greatest evils that are allowed to work in human personality are: *resentments*, *fear*, *self-centeredness*, and *a sense of guilt*.¹

¹ In this section, as in one or two other parts of this address, I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to ideas and suggestions contained in E. Stanley Jones' *Is The Kingdom of God Realism?*

1. Take resentments. If they are rankling in your heart and poisoning your peace, your business as a Christian is to confess them to God and ask Him to cleanse them from your life. But let me make this clear: even though you do experience such cleansing and the consequent victory of it, there is constant need of disciplining yourself against the return of these bitter spiritual poisons.

You have a sense of being wronged, snubbed, or perhaps deprived, or insulted. You are human enough to feel it, but the question is, are you Christian enough to react to it without bitterness or retaliation? It is at the point of that initial reaction that the most severe test comes. It is just there that we need to nip the evil flower in the bud. Resentments are not hard to deal with if we give them no foothold. It is when we entertain them, brood over them, nurture them, that they become habitual and utterly hurtful.

It is your Christian business and mine to train ourselves, by the grace of Christ, to live above grudges and enmities and animosities. A sanctified and disciplined believer can say with Luther, "My soul is too glad and too great to be the enemy of any man."

2. Take the matter of *anxieties*. By this we mean emotional tensions, such as worry, which do not make one stronger to meet reality but weaker. There are fears, of course, which are not harmful but indispensably helpful. The fear that causes one to leap for his life from the threat of a coiled rattlesnake is a sound fear. On the other hand, when a superstitious African drops dead, as many a one has been known to do, from hearing that someone "has pointed a bone" at him, he is the victim of an acute anxiety complex and is therefore to be profoundly pitied.

Some years ago an article appeared in the British Medical Journal in which a doctor wrote concerning the relationship between arthritis and worry. He closed his article with this interesting, slyly humorous sentence: "Chase out the 'jitterbug' and other bugs won't find it nearly so easy to thrive." In the light of that professional

comment I turn to the New Testament and hear our divine Lord say, "Be not anxious for the morrow . . . your heavenly Father knoweth what things ye have need of," or again, "Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. And as I take those blessed words to myself I realize that He knew I would need them for the health of my body not less than for the serenity of my spirit.

If you and I will discipline ourselves to say, in the face of whatever life flings at us, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me," we are going to be circumstance-proof and worry-proof. Others have found it so. Why should we doubt that we can until we have given Christ a fair chance at us?

It was one of God's disciplined ones who, after being blinded in an accident, was told by his doctor that some sight could be saved in one eye but that the other would have to be removed and a glass eye put in. The patient thought a moment and then said, "All right, doctor, I consent, but if you do have to put in a glass eye, please put a twinkle in it." There you have it in magnificent display: a self-mastery that shines out of the darkest of dark circumstances.

3. Then there is that foe of the healthy life called *self-centeredness*. Discipline yourself away from that. You have heard people say of some other person, "He has lots of personality." Very well, recall Henry Link's definition of personality, when the word is used in this sense: "I define personality," says Dr. Link, "as the extent to which one has habits and skills which interest and serve other people . . . Its emphasis is on doing things with and for other persons. Its essence is self-sacrifice, not self-gratification."

But long, long ago a greater than Dr. Link said precisely the same thing when he declared, "Love seeketh not her own, is not puffed up," or again, "Be kindly affectioned one to another, with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another."

Undisciplined people are always insisting on having their own way. Yet they are not happy. For he who begins by demanding

that he have his own way will end by despising the way he has demanded. It is no accident that the happiest Christians in the world are the ones who "count all things but loss for Christ." Their satisfactions are great because they are derived from sources outside themselves.

John Wesley was such a person. On one occasion he was preaching when a mob fell upon him and stoned him. He was rescued and carried into a fine home nearby, which happened to be the residence of the local vicar of the Established Church. The vicar was wealthy. He had several servants. While he and Mr. Wesley were talking, the latter resting from his close call with death, one of the servants, walking through the room, dropped a piece of coal. Instantly the pastor flared with anger and roundly rebuked the humiliated servant. As the blushing girl left the room, he turned to Mr. Wesley, sighed a heavy sigh and said, "You see, Mr. Wesley, we too have our crosses." Crosses indeed! What a name for them! Here was one man whose self-mastery was broken up by the falling of a piece of coal on a nice rug and another man whose self-mastery held him together when stones were falling upon his own head. One was self-centered, the other Christ-centered. It makes a difference!

So we have, on the positive side, the call of the grace of God to discipline ourselves to lives of self-mastery and integrity. But, as already noted, we shall be neither honest nor self-controlled unless we remember the third member of this trinity—piety. 'Godliness' is another word by which the apostle's thought is sometimes expressed. Whether we prefer one term or the other, the idea is plain: here is the realm where we inwardly and consistently practice the presence of God.

It is this realm of our life where we say to ourselves, You must take time for your Quiet Hour. You must give place, regularly and devotedly, to prayer. You must nourish your mind with the great thoughts and insights of the literature of the soul, which supremely is the Bible and secondarily the noble books of saintly thinkers and teachers. You must make

room for group fellowship on the spiritual plane. You go in for it on other levels: you have your merchants' associations, your labor unions, your social clubs, your political parties. They serve their purpose, but they cannot do for you what the society of fellow believers will do for you. Therefore, discipline yourself to go to the house of God. Stop being soft with yourself. Quit the petty business of letting yourself manufacture endless excuses for leaving off a service here and another there. You are cheating yourself—and others. It is a form of slow spiritual suicide, and you should know it.

Instead of waiting for someone else to say such things to us, we should say them to ourselves. We should get some iron into our spiritual life, some red blood into our spiritual veins. It will jolt us to begin with, but it will do us untold good. We shall be vastly more effective in our Christian discipleship.

A New York clergyman was writing an article to which he had given the title, "Do We Really Want God's Control?" Into his study came a friend of his, also a minister. Glancing over the shoulder of his host the visitor caught sight of that title, and remarked, "The answer to that question is, No." Then, rather shockingly, he faced his friend with this question: "Don't you really enjoy your sins?" And just as if the answer in his own life were Yes, he began to confess to his friend things he was indulging in his program of living that he felt were far from God's will. They were not vicious things but they were sapping sins of the spirit: failing to program his time so as to get the most out of it, too much love of comfort and ease, nursing ambition for the recognition and honor that his church might give, fear of the unfavorable opinions of people, yes, and downright selfishness.

The seated clergyman waited a moment and then began by saying that he had felt the lure and pull of practically all of these temptations and that only through complete abandonment to Christ had he found the way of power. Then he added, "*I have found that we Christians must choose which pain we want to suffer: the pain of a crucified self or the pain of a divided mind.*" It went home to the heart of the honest man who had made his confession of inner defeat and inner lack of discipline.

As he stood there in deep thought, his friend said, "What do you feel like when you come to that place in the Holy Communion where it says, 'And here we offer and present unto Thee our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto Thee?'" To which the brother could only reply, "That is a bad spot, isn't it?"

What do *you* say, fellow Christian, when you come to that spot? It is not a sufficient answer to say that we are all imperfect and unprofitable servants. In ourselves we are. But Christians who know their resources in Christ are to be "strong in the Lord and in the power of His might." "The great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ . . . gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works."

It is this great Saviour who calls us to forsake our sloth and softness, our half-heartedness and our worldliness, for a life of sturdy, sustained and steadfast discipline. Listen in the hush of this moment, as He says, tenderly yet ruthlessly, "If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out . . . if thine hand or thy foot offend thee, cut it off. For it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, with one hand, with one foot, than, having two, to be cast into hell."