

Scripture

Galatians 3:23-29 (NRSVUE)

²³ Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴ Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be reckoned as righteous by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Based on Galatians 3:23-29, our discipline is centered around the understanding that the law served as a temporary guardian or disciplinarian until the coming of faith in Christ Jesus.

In essence, discipline is not based on the law but on the relationship with Christ, achieved through faith, reflecting the new identity as children of God and the unity in Christ.

Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.

Some time ago, I decided I needed a new dictionary. This urge happens to me from time to time. I seem to have accumulated all sorts of odd dictionaries in my study; a gigantic unabridged dictionary that I bought years ago from a discount publisher for \$9.95; the Oxford English Dictionary which I received when I was a member of the Book-of-the-Month Club; a tiny Webster's Dictionary which I obtained for free just by letting an encyclopedia salesman come to my house. My old college student dictionary, however, which was used the most, had fallen apart.

I needed a dictionary large enough to be comprehensive and contemporary, but small enough that I could hold it in one hand. I went to the bookstore and purchased, at full value, the tenth edition of Merriam-Webster's Dictionary. It is a fine volume, and I use it frequently. It contains satisfactory accounts of both past etymologies and present contemporary usage's.

It hadn't failed me at all, until recently. Our lesson from Galatians 3 contains what for me is one of the most important words in Christianity, even though it is used only three times in the New Testament. The word is translated today, in the New Revised Standard Version, as "disciplinarian." The law, says the Apostle Paul, was our disciplinarian until Christ came. The Greek word is actually pedagogy, which we have come to understand generally as the science of teaching.

The word "disciplinarian" uses as its root, obviously, the word, "discipline." It is this word "discipline" which may be one of the most important words of our life.

I looked it up and what I read there horrified me. I am not so much chagrined at the definitions as I am by my own sad acknowledgment it is probably an accurate reflection of how our society understands this great word "discipline."

Merriam-Webster's has two numbered definitions of "discipline." The first definition is "punishment." Discipline has come to mean punishment. That definition horrifies me and unfortunately symbolizes what many of us understand as discipline. It means punishment to many of us.

I quickly read the second definition. This second definition is noted as being obsolete. This means that this second definition may have been accurate some time ago but is no longer used so frequently in this way. The second definition is "instruction."

So, we are given two definitions for the word "discipline." The primary way in which this word is understood is as "punishment." The obsolete meaning is "instruction."

I want to talk about the obsolete meaning of the word "discipline." I urge today, perhaps against a tidal wave of opposition, to regard "discipline" as "instruction," not as "punishment."

If we understand "discipline" as punishment, then we will miss the power of Paul's words to the Galatians, "the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came."

Some years ago, some of the most industrious members of a wonderful church organized and attended a Vacation Bible School. That is to say, the teachers were industrious, and the students were industrious. They studied the childhood of Jesus, at home, at school, and at the temple. In so doing, they used one verse of the Old Testament scriptures as their benchmark. Students repeated it every day.

The scripture was the great commandment, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart."

The students learned this verse just as Jesus and the Hebrews have learned it for generations -- not as punishment at all! But as instruction! And as life, as joy, as excitement! They learned that week because of discipline, organization and order, repetition and instruction, clarity and love. This is not **only** how children learn, but how **all** of us learn. We learn because disciplined people teach us how to be disciplined.

Discipline requires effort, just as anything worthwhile. One of the historic tensions in Christianity is between those who think we can become a Jesus-way person overnight, and those who think we become a Jesus-way person over a lifetime. Both are, in a sense, correct. It takes the moment of conversion, the moment of baptism, to make suddenly, a new believer in the Jesus-way. But, the process of developing virtues, character, and a life, takes a lifetime of discipline in the Jesus-way.

We as a faith community, try to teach ourselves such discipline..

- We say we will baptize you, but you need to attend pre-Baptism classes.
- We say we will officiate at your marriage, but you need to attend pre-marital instruction.
- We say we will teach you how to pray, but you're going to have to come to pray together.
- We say we will teach you how to give as Christ gave, but you're going to have to learn how to give.
- We say we will teach you how to love others, but you're going to have to love and support the poor.

At every such suggestion, we meet opposition. Folks always want the church's services without the church's discipline. That's fine. It's part of our discipline to serve, and to serve generously. But if we want genuinely to live the life of Christ, a new life of joy generosity, then we will at some point take on discipline.

At its best, this is what the Law was to the Hebrews of old. It was a way of learning God. It was not punishment. It was instruction toward a greater good. The Law cared for the Hebrews, and the Hebrews loved the Law.

Law as discipline is still with us. It is behind every successful person in this world. For success does not mean simply winning the lottery and retiring to the beach. Success means the reward of self-effort and industry, the disciplined sacrifice of some things for a greater good.

Discipline takes time, as every successful athlete knows. Even those born with great athletic skills must practice, must take on a regimen of discipline. It's been said that musicians learn much better if they practice one hour for twenty days than if they simply practice for twenty hours straight. Success requires the time of sustained discipline.

Yet, for all of this, for all the deep joy of the disciplined life, Paul is saying something else in Galatians, isn't he? Paul knew that the dark side of the Law was not in regarding it as punishment. The dark side of the Law, and the dark side of any law which we use as a standard for our lives, is that it can begin to take the place of a living relationship with love, a living relationship with God.

This is why Paul says that the Law was our disciplinarian until Christ came. Paul in no way disparages the Law, or discipline. But Paul is saying that the Law leads to the living Christ. The law leads to something greater.

When Christ comes, when we discover living relationship with Jesus Christ, we are in touch with what discipline was designed to teach us in the first place. Discipline is supposed to lead us to something else. Our Christian disciplines are supposed to instruct us about Christ, but they are not supposed to get in the way of our relationship with Christ.

There is a perfect law, a perfect discipline, which I believe...

- Children can experience in Vacation Bible School
- We can experience in the church's mission efforts to the poor
- We can experience within any of this Church's disciplines.

It is that perfect law of love...

- When our faith takes us beyond the mechanics of our discipline
- When our faith takes us to relationship with Christ

Then, we are face to face with love. We are where our disciplines are designed to lead to the perfect love of Jesus Christ. It is a beautiful and generous place, where past distinctions are not nearly so important as present love, where there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female, but where we are all one in the Jesus-way.

That is our destination, not to be achieved by punishment, but by instruction, which leads to discipline; which leads to faith; which leads to character and virtue and the life of love.

“Faith” (v.23) is just *believing what God says*, and we have always had faith (Heb.11:4). So, when Paul talks about a time “before faith came” (v.23), he is talking about a different *kind* of faith! He’s talking about “*the* faith” that he mentions again at the end of verse 23. That’s a reference to *the body of truth* revealed to Paul, the one he told the Corinthians to “stand fast” in (I Cor.16:13).

But why would a Jew like Paul say to Gentiles like the Galatians that “we” were under the law? It’s because if a Gentile wanted to be saved under the law, they had to go see a Jew, who would teach them how the law said they could be saved and keeping the law’s offerings, sabbaths, and feasts, etc. So, Jews *and* Gentiles were under the law.

The legalizers were telling the Galatians they had to become Jews to be saved, *for that's what the law said* (Ex.12:48). But Paul says there's neither "Jew nor Greek" in Christ (Gal. 3:28). Under the law, Gentiles were *servants* to Jews (Lev. 25:45,46) and always will be, even in the kingdom of heaven on earth (Isa. 14:1,2;61:5) when men will be back under the law. But there's "neither slave nor free" in Christ (Gal.3:28).

Under the law, women couldn't be leaders (Deut. 21:5), and leaders brought God and men together with sacrifices. But there is "neither male nor female" in Christ, so we all are "ambassadors for Christ" (II Cor.5:20) who can bring God and everyone together by offering them *Christ's* sacrifice.

Christ was Abraham's seed (Mt.1:1), so if you're in Christ, *you too are* (Gal.3:29)—*spiritual* seed in the Jesus-way, the one God promised eternal life to (Gen.13:15 cf. Rom.4:13-16). With the instructors sense of discipline's way, we are all lifetime learners in the Jesus-way. Amen!