

In the Christian tradition, middle names often take their origin from a desire to honor family history or to provide a saint’s name for Baptism. To parents, they also serve an ancillary purpose! By using our middle name, our parents sent a clear message that discipline was imminent. It took me years before I overcame the fear of my middle name, my mother’s maiden name! But in all seriousness, the issue of discipline is treated squarely in the second reading from Hebrews.

A disciplined person strives to maintain a set routine in both the sacred and secular realm. Discipline applies to all aspects of life—school, work, prayer life—all around us. We waste a tremendous amount of time, even while admitting that we all have need for some time away from activity. Hopefully, the summer provided that time for you and your family.

As the summer’s end appears on the horizon, it is the perfect time to re-evaluate and re-ignite whatever suffered from any lack of discipline on our parts this summer. The Letter to the Hebrews exhorts us to strengthen our drooping hands and weak knees. How do we do this?

I recall a T-Shirt at the State Fair that had me simultaneously chuckling and shaking my head. The front read *Hard Work pays off later...* On the reverse side...*Laziness pays off right now.* While humorous, it does betray the attitude that somehow *hard work* is at best a reality that we tolerate.

If we run from discipline, either as it derives from a legitimate authority, or in its meaning as an ordered and productive life, we are really running from the Lord. Rather, let us see discipline as God’s gift to us to keep our lives centered on His Will for us. We ought not disdain discipline because its purpose is to keep us closer to Him. The peaceful fruit of righteousness comes from knowing that at the end of the day, we have put in a solid effort in work, home or school. This gives glory to God. If our children learn to value hard work early on, they will surely be spared from some painful lessons later. Spiritual discipline challenges us

to change, to track progress and to keep us focused on what is truly important. After all, the root meaning of the word is the same as the word *disciple*, meaning student. We have a sacred duty to seek growth in our faith. For this, discipline is critical. And our Catholic faith aids us in this. One way is by means of asceticism.

Taken literally, asceticism (Gr. *askein*) means “to exercise, take pains, labor, to strive.”<sup>1</sup> The Greeks used the word to describe the exercises of the athletes, whereby the powers of the body were developed to their fullest potential. The end for which these exercises were undertaken was the bestowal of a laurel-wreath on the victor in the Olympic games. The Christian life is, as Christ assures us, a struggle for the kingdom of heaven (Mt 11:12). We seek an imperishable crown of victory in heaven.

In the gospel, Jesus used the image of a narrow gate, lest we think of this as an easy journey, for it is certainly not. Asceticism may be seen in terms of both exterior and interior mortification: exterior mortification is the mortification of sensuality and the senses; interior mortification consists in the purification of the faculties of the soul (memory, imagination, intellect, will) and the mastering of the passions. Both are needed.

It is not a term limited to professed religious in monasteries wearing hair shorts! It may be practiced in everyday settings: giving up a desert or skipping a meal, turn off the air conditioner on a hot night, setting aside a determined prayer time; accepting crosses without complaint.

In the end, when we embrace the discipline of the Lord, we free ourselves to be more receptive to His love and Grace, making straight the paths for our feet to lead us to the loving arms of our Father.

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<sup>1</sup> Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, the word is followed by an infinitive (as in Xenophon, mem. 2, 1, 6; Cyril 5, 5, 12, etc.). See Acts 24:16, where the word issued.