## Applying Hebrews 12:11 in Youth Ministry.

By Thomas Fretwell

#### The word no one wants to hear

Even uttering the term "church discipline" can cause dismay for many pastors and church leaders. The highly emotive nature of this subject often means that practically church discipline can be a painful and disconcerting experience. So often the difficulty of navigating through the emotional and relational elements of church discipline has meant that the theological aspects are inadvertently made to take a back seat. The neat and tidy outlines for church discipline that we formulate from theology books do not warn us of the unique and challenging personalities that can be involved in such scenarios. I am certain that the majority of church leaders would be able to recount traumatic stories of times where they felt it necessary to address a particular issue in the congregation and no sooner than the words have left their lips charges of "heavy shepherding" and "self-righteousness" were being thrown back at them. On the other side of the coin, you do not have to be in a church setting too long before you meet a Christian who has been severely damaged in their walk with Christ due to the pain and hurt they have suffered at the hands of the church –usually targeting the leadership as the chief culprits. My purpose is not to adjudicate on which "side" has the moral high ground in such circumstances, as I hope should be clear to all, this would entirely miss the point and be an exercise in futility. This chapter will seek to outline the required outcomes of church discipline and focus particularity on the unique challenges that youth ministry can present in achieving the desired results. Before moving on to these topics I would like to share a light hearted illustration that can help us to remember that the problem is more than just "one bad pill", it is that we are all sinners in need of grace.

A man who had been lost at sea eventually became stranded on a desert island for many years. One morning from the shore he noticed a ship in the horizon; he immediately built a fire and began to generate as much smoke as possible. To his surprise, it worked! The ship was heading his way. When the ship was close enough to the shore it anchored and dispatched a small vessel to land on the shore. The man was overjoyed with the prospect of being rescued and met his rescuers as they landed on the beach.

After the initial celebratory conversation the Captain asked the man how he had been able to survive for so long on his own.

The man replied by recounting his exploits of hunting and foraging and how he was able to build himself a very comfortable house. In fact, the man said, "you can see my house over there." He pointed to inland to the edge of the jungle. They looked up and saw three buildings. They inquired about the building next to the man's house, he replied, "that's my church." Then the Captain asked what the third building was, than man replied, "That's where I used to go to church."

# Why Church Discipline?

Although the subject of church discipline can be extremely difficult both in its doctrinal content and practical application, it is an area that the church must not overlook. The doctrine of church

discipline is founded firmly upon the teachings of scripture and thus rests upon their divine authority. This means that church discipline is not an optional extra for the functioning of a healthy church, but a necessary component that God saw fit to incorporate into his revealed Word. Ultimately, church discipline must be practiced because the church has a responsibility to obey the word of God in its entirety. One of the problems may be that church discipline is often solely associated with the corrective and negative persona it has assumed in our Christian sub- culture, Carl Laney gives this definition:

"Church discipline may be broadly defined as the confrontive and corrective measures taken by an individual, church leaders, or the congregation regarding a matter of sin in the life of a believer." 1

While this is a very real element, perhaps those tasked with the responsibility of administering church discipline would not be so averse to doing so if the positive elements were also promoted in our biblical theology of church discipline. Having a broader theology of church discipline might also serve as a corrective to the damaging misapplication that is often seen in this area.

Church leaders must understand the bigger theological picture, of which church discipline is just a part. That is the process of individual and corporate conformity to the image of Christ. It is a matter of discipleship. J.E. Adams comments that:

"Discipline is not, as many have thought, simply the negative task of reading troublemakers out of the church. Rather, first above all, it is God's provision for good order in His church that creates conditions for the instruction and growth of the members. Discipline has a positive function."<sup>2</sup>

Ensuring that the community of the church provides an environment that is conducive to the discipleship process is vital for any local church body. Part of being a disciple is to be a pupil. The Greek term for disciple was *mathetes*, which literally referred to a "learner". As Disciples of Christ we are to learn from him, we are His students. Jesus makes this point in his famous invitation found in the Gospel of Matthew:

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." <sup>3</sup>

Christ bids those who would follow him to come and learn from him. He also emphasised the central role of learning in the discipleship process when he gave the great commission. He instructed His disciples to make other disciples by "teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matthew 28:20). The consistent use of educational language reminds us that we are students in the School of Christ; one of the functions of the church is to be an educational institution. As such, students will on occasion need correcting in order to protect the learning environment and ensure personal growth. This is where church discipline enters into the process. It is important to understand that church discipline is never practiced in a vacuum, never simply as a way to scold the "bad students"; it always has a redemptive purpose in the educational process:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Laney, Carl. A Guide to Church Discipline, Bethany House Publishers 1989. Pg 14

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Adams, J.E. *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1986. Pg 17

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Matthew 11:28-30

For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

It is a mistake to view church discipline as just a form of punishment. It is a corrective process designed to train and restore. It is for "our good" in order that we may share of "His Holiness". It ultimately intends to bring us to that point where it yields the "fruit of righteousness" in our lives. From our perspective, which we must admit is very limited; discipline can be a process that is not particularly enjoyable, it can actually be sorrowful. Yet it remains part of the process God uses to edify and build up the church. R.C. Sproul writes, "The church is called not only to a ministry of reconciliation, but a ministry of nurture to those within her gates. Part of that nurture includes church discipline." The words of Jesus in Revelation 3:19 remind us that discipline, although painful, is actually a sign of his love for us:

### Youth Ministry and Church Discipline

Hebrews 12:10-11

Before exploring the particular challenges that often accompany youth ministry it is important to understand what we actually mean by "youth ministry". The term today is used so broadly that almost any activity involving someone under the age of 25 is often classed as "youth ministry". As this chapter is concerned with the subject of church discipline it primarily addresses those in leadership positions such as youth pastors. There are many different models of youth ministry, a recent volume, *Youth ministry in the 21*<sup>st</sup> *Century: Five Views* published by Baker academic, does a good job of outlining these different perspectives. No particular model will be advocated in this chapter instead a more eclectic approach will be used that allows youth leaders to custom fit their methodology to the needs of their particular bodies. The approach taken by a large inner city youth group will inevitably need to differ from a small rural church setting. For a youth pastor it may at times seem like you are simply "entertainment co-ordinators", "program directors" or even "taxi drivers", due to the requirements that often accompany youth work. However it is vital to remember that fundamentally you are a Pastor, and as a pastor you are also a theologian. The addition of the word "youth" has developed more from a practical organisational requirement rather than from any specific biblical teaching.

Greg Stier makes the intriguing pronouncement that Jesus was a "youth leader". The fact that we wince at such a suggestion might indicate how we have allowed the idea of youth ministry to be more associated with pizza and games than with biblical discipleship. Stier's point deserves attention; he supports this radical assertion by appealing to the gospel of Matthew chapter 17:24-27. Here we read the account when Jesus miraculously provided the funds to pay the temple tax. Stier points out that only Jesus and Peter were required to pay the tax, yet the text tells us that Jesus came with all his disciples. This becomes more pertinent when you cross reference it with Exodus 30:14 which teaches that only those over twenty were required to pay the tax. Stier concludes that:

<sup>&</sup>quot;Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Sproul, R.C. *In Search of Dignity*. Regal Books: 1983. Pg 182

"all the disciples were there. Only Jesus and Peter paid. The temple tax is only for those twenty years old or older. If I'm reading this right, then Jesus was a youth leader with one adult sponsor."  $^{5}$ 

Now obviously the ministry of Jesus was not just limited to people under twenty, however this does provide us an encouraging model of ministry to those we would today class as youth. Jesus is the "good shepherd", Peter called him the "chief shepherd" and as a pastor you are his under-shepherds and he provides a flawless pattern of conduct for pastors today, he epitomises all the qualities that should be present in a spiritual leader. Pastors are to "shepherd the flock of God among you"<sup>6</sup>, this involves feeding them the word of God through preaching and teaching, praying for them regularly, exercising authority where necessary, providing an example in speech and conduct, loving them in order to display the Fathers love, and seeking to make disciples of all members so that the body may be built up and mature in the "fullness of Christ."<sup>7</sup>

## **Cultural Trends and Youth Ministry**

#### The Social Media Generation

Youth pastors who minister to the generation that grew up during the 2000's will be aware of the huge role social media now plays in the lives of our youth. With words like "selfie", "emoji" and "retweet" gaining themselves a position in the pages of the prestigious Oxford English dictionary and sites like "facebook", "Instagram" and "snap chat" being part of teenager's everyday language. The challenge is not to bemoan this state of affairs by trying to explain how it was for us in the "good old days" before we slept with smart phones by our bed, this is simply a reality they have never been a part of and trying to convince them it was better is largely futile – and unproven. For those actively involved in ministering to this culture we need to navigate it with wisdom and understanding. There are many opportunities and benefits that can come from this; however this technological turn has also resulted in a number of cultural shifts that require our attention in order to ensure that we are still effective in ministering to this generation. The "facebook culture" has led to a type of reductionism in both the teaching and learning styles of young people today – actually not just young people! Information is so readily available on any subject that you could possibly require, that personal in-depth research is a largely forgotten trade, instead quick sound bite answers that can be made to fit into a status update are often all people will read on a particular topic before they feel sufficiently informed to make confident assertions about the given situation. It may be that we have reached the situation which Neil Postman wrote about in his 1985 book: Amusing ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show business. Postman wrote about how the predicted Orwellian totalitarian state had not manifested in 1984. Rather, Postman writes, the dystopian future described in Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, which was perhaps even more insidious than Orwells, had arrived:

"Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think. What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Stier, G. "The Gospel Advancing View of Youth Ministry" in *Youth ministry in the 21*<sup>st</sup> *Century: Five Views.* Grand Rapids. Baker Academic. 2015. Pg 4

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> 1Peter 5:2

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Ephesians 4:13

would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance."

Over the years I have watched as people discuss enormously complex topics through the medium of social media, I have witnessed how opinions devoid of any factual or propositional content are packaged into sound-bites and "memes" that seek to influence people via their emotions rather than a concern for the truth. Social media is the great equalizer in an egalitarian society! Everyone has an opinion and the opportunity to air it (this is not necessarily a bad thing), however when this is coupled with the postmodern pluralism so prevalent with the younger generation it causes effective communication to break down. The postmodern mindset argues for a relativistic conception of truth and falsely teaches that all ideas are equally valid and no one person's opinion should be elevated above the other. The resultant effect is the trivialising of the public square for meaningful discourse. Postman is again insightful as he comments that people:

"No longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas, they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials." 10

This type of learning environment is a huge challenge to those in ministry. Do we simply acquiesce to the culture and shorten the sermons, focus on entertainment, making sure we do not offend anyone by challenging their ideas? Hopefully not! For pastors the challenge is to put in more focus on training congregations to recapture the discipline of learning. The topic the church teaches- the content of biblical revelation, is simply too rich to be reduced to such a sound- bite level without sacrificing substance. In addition, we need to teach about the need for proper authority structures that are too often erased by the "equality" of social media, particularity within the church. If as youth pastors we have made the mistake of trying too hard to relate and just be friends with those we are trying to disciple then if a situation arises where we need to move the relationship from one of fun and friendship to one of discipline and correction, the task is much harder as the proper authority structure has not been appropriately defined in the relationship. Only within the context of the correct authority structure will both leader and congregant be able to navigate the painful experience that church discipline often produces before the positive fruit is evident further down the line.

### What does Hebrews 12:11 have to do with it?

This verse appears at the end of a section in the book of Hebrews concerning the Father's discipline of his children. This must be understood if we are to extract from it the primary theological purpose of discipline. In Hebrews 12:5-6 the author quotes from the book of Proverbs 3:11-12. This Old Testament text exhorts the reader to not "lose heart" when confronted with God's discipline, but

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show business*. New York: Penguin Books. 1986. Pg 7

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> A meme is usually a satirical photo with a caption over it to make a point.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show business*. New York: Penguin Books. 1986. Pg 92

rather consider it a sign of his love and a confirmation of true sonship. Guthrie comments that two points stand out in the author's use of this text:

"(1) The author places the subject of discipline in a positive framework as a topic for "encouragement" or "comfort" because of the references to the Lord's love and acceptance in Proverbs 3:12 (Heb 12:6). (2) The writer takes the reference to the "son" in the proverb to be directly applicable to the Christian community." 11

The rest of this section in Hebrews is really an exposition of this text from Proverbs. In Hebrews 12:7-8 the author argues that when believers are faced with a situation of difficulty or hardship that might cause them to think they have been forgotten by God or that they are being treated unfairly, the reality is that "God is treating you as His children" (12:7). Enduring hardship in this life is actually a confirmation of legitimate sonship. The security that can come from knowing with certainty that a strong Father-Son/Daughter relationship exists even through trials is cause for tremendous comfort to those who may be feeling alone and vulnerable in this world. This is a powerful element of this teaching that is particularly pertinent to the subject of youth ministry. Our author says "what children are not disciplined by their father? (12:7)" The implication is that the presence of discipline is normative for the proper functioning of the parent-child relationship. F.F Bruce points out that earlier in the epistle it is mentioned that even Christ, "Son though he was, learned obedience from what he suffered (Heb 5:8)." In verse 8 the author provides the juxtaposition; that if you are not experiencing any discipline or hardship in your life then that is a sure sign you are illegitimate – not true sons and daughters at all!

In the context of the first century an illegitimate son had no right to the inheritance. This metaphor is picked up by the author in Hebrews to teach us about spiritual sonship. The clear teaching of the New Testament is that a person who is truly born again (John 3:3), who exercises saving faith in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26), and has the Spirit of God (Romans 8:9) is a true son and legitimate heir to the promise of eternal life. This son-heir motif is used to teach about the pre-eminence of Christ in the first chapter of Hebrews. The author says that in these days God has spoken to us through his Son, "whom he appointed heir of all things" (Hebrews 1:2). One of the amazing aspects of the Gospel that must be kept in focus, particularly during times when God is disciplining us, is that we are said to be "adopted as sons" (Romans 8:15) and due to this we are "fellow heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17), what an encouragement this is for people to endure a time of discipline that may be unpleasant in the moment. For leaders who may be either directly a part of the disciplinary procedure or simply someone who gives counsel to those presently enduring hardship, the theology of Sonship and its glorious benefits should be clearly explained and integrated into our practical theology.

In verse 9 the author makes an argument using a traditional rabbinic hermeneutic called *Qal wahomer* – what applies in a less important case will certainly apply in a more important case. <sup>12</sup> This "lesser to greater" argument is often known as an *a fortiori* argument in the western tradition. The lesser situation in this case is the analogy of discipline involving a human father and son. The fact is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Guthrie, George H. *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1998: Pg 400

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Longenecker, Richard N. *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans ~Publishing Co. 1999. Pg 20

that even human fathers, who are flawed by human shortcomings, are still appreciated when they provide discipline and instruction for their children. MacArthur comments on this verse that:

"Even while they are growing up, children instinctively know that a parent who disciplines fairly is a parent who loves and cares. They also realise that a parent who always lets them have their own way is a parent who does not care."<sup>13</sup>

The authors point is made in the "greater" part of the argument. Given that God is perfect in all his ways and therefore his discipline and justice will be perfect, shouldn't we gladly submit to his discipline as he prepares us for eternity, just as our earthly fathers seek to prepare us for life on earth?

### **Bridging the Gap**

It is at this point in the exegesis where many today might find this part of the text difficult to identify with. This is an issue where youth Pastors will need to bridge the cultural context of the bible to the reality of the situation they find with their young people. Tragically many youth today will not be able to relate to the positive aspect of Parent-Child discipline. If they have suffered any abuse at the hands of a parent or have only experienced discipline that is more akin to anger then this analogy in the text will be difficult to grasp. To further exasperate the problem there are around one million children in the UK growing up without any meaningful contact with their fathers. <sup>14</sup> Currently the issue of family breakdown costs the UK nearly £49 billion a year – more than the government spends on the whole defence budget. The effects of this on young people are tragic and well documented. The NHS recently released data that hospital admissions for "self harm" have increased by 132% in the last few years<sup>15</sup>. The primary reason for this was given as "family relationships". As a youth pastor this is something you will encounter and need to realise that in order to minster correctly to these young people these issues have to be factored into the practical outworking of our theology, particularly in the sensitive area of Church discipline.

In the Greco-Roman culture when the epistle to the Hebrews was written, it was the fathers who had the ultimate responsibility of training a son. In today's culture, that is less patriarchal, this relationship parallels any parent – mother or father, who takes an active role in bringing up a child – son or daughter, since in many contemporary contexts the responsibility rests with both. As Guthrie points out most modern cultures no longer demarcate between the training of a son or a daughter. You may be dealing with a mother-daughter relationship as much as a father-son relationship; the biblical principles in our text still apply. The problem young people may have, is that they do not have any model of positive discipline in their lives and this omission stands as a cultural stumbling block to understanding this text. This is why the broader responsibility of youth leader as mentors and role models is crucial. You may be the people in their lives who have the opportunity to model

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Macarthur. John. *Hebrews: MNTC*. Chicago: Moody Press. 1983. Pg 395

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> The Centre for Social Justice Fractured Families Report. June 2013. Last accessed 30/12/2015. http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/UserStorage/pdf/Pdf%20reports/CSJ\_Fractured\_Families\_Report\_W EB 13.06.13.pdf

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Counselling Directory, "Britain's Broken Families to blame for rise in teen self-harm". December 10<sup>th</sup> 2012. Last accessed 30/12/2015. http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/blog/2012/12/10/britains-broken-families-to-blame-for-rise-in-teen-self-harm-says-charity/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Guthrie, George H. *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1998: Pg 407

this type of environment for them. This is why in the bible we find such stringent qualifications concerning family relationships for those who are to be elders in the church. This is one of the strengths of the "adoption" view of youth ministry as outlined by Chap Clark, the church can be that "family of families". Clark states;

"The goal of youth ministry as adoption for every child, every adolescent, and every young adult to be so embraced by the community of faith that they know they will always have a home, a people, and a place where they can discover who they are and how they are able to contribute."<sup>17</sup>

In my personal experience this approach has been among the most rewarding and beneficial part of youth ministry. It allows you to build real relationships that provide an intimate arena for discipleship. It will result in real joy but also real pain as you go through the struggles of life with them, as you are burdened for them in prayer and desire their wellbeing both physically and spiritually. However is this burden and pain not similar to how God must feel with all of us when we fall short? Surely as his under-shepherds we should expect something similar as we shepherd this young precious flock? The reality is some may decide not to be part of the family and choose a destructive path that leads them away from Christ. The hope is that others will be grounded in their faith having witnessed and been a part of the family of God in the local church, growing through times of trial, be it church discipline or situations at home, and ultimately growing to maturity in Christ.

# The Benefits of Discipline

In Hebrews 12:10-11 the author rounds out his carefully crafted exposition of the text from Proverbs by detailing the desired fruit of discipline. The author tells us that God's discipline is for "our good" in order that "we may share in his holiness". This is God's greatest desire for his children; that we may share in his holiness. We do this by being conformed to the image of His Son. This requires that we embrace and submit to divine discipline whether it is direct from God or through the agency of the leadership of a local church. Positionally we are Holy due to the benefits of justification, but this is referring to practical holiness, what theologically we call sanctification. Bargerhuff comments that "discipline is the means God uses in our progressive sanctification". 18

The author reminds us in verse 11 that discipline itself is not going to be a pleasant experience, or else it would be largely useless in correcting aberrant behaviour. Instead the author instructs us that discipline, at the time, will seem "sorrowful". The point is that the fruit of discipline in the end means that it is worth enduring the difficulty. The old sports expression "no pain no gain" is used to illustrate this same point. Upon reflection of his life the late Malcom Mugeridge observed:

"Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on painful experiences that at the time seemed desolating and painful, with particular satisfaction. Indeed I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy five years, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness. If it ever were possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence, the result would not be to make life

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Clark, Chap. "The Adoption View of Youth Ministry" in *Youth ministry in the 21*<sup>st</sup> Century: Five Views. Grand Rapids. Baker Academic. 2015. Pg 85

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Bargerhuff, Eric. J. Love That Rescues: God's Fatherly Love in the Practice of Church Discipline. Oregon: Wipf & Stock. 2010. Pg 109

delectable, but to make it too banal or trivial to be endurable. This of course is what the cross signifies and it is the cross more than anything else that has called me inexorably to Christ."<sup>19</sup>

There exists within the pages of scripture a clear strand of teaching that enduring hardships and even suffering are to be considered a blessing when understood in light of the bigger picture of what God may be accomplishing in your life. In Hebrews 12:11 this positive outcome is given as the "peaceful fruit of righteousness". Righteousness (v11) is synonymous with holiness (v10) and is again referring to the process of sanctification in the life of the believer. God uses times of discipline to transform our hearts and minds to godliness and further conformity to Jesus Christ. This is not mere external or behavioural change produced through an adherence to rules and regulations but a deep transformation of the inner man caused by our relationship to Christ. As Muggeridge said, it is the cross that beckons us to Christ. It is Christ who produces this fruit in our lives as we shed behaviours that hinder our walk with him, as we see and feel the devastating effects of sin, as we learn to walk not in our own strength but in his, as our hearts and desires are put in line with his, as he produces in us compassion and humility and the fruits of the spirit become evident in our lives and service to him.

# Where to go from here?

The task of church discipline remains formidable, particularly within the context of youth ministry. I hope that some of the principles outlined in this chapter will be beneficial in both formulating a theologically rich understanding of the subject as well as providing principles to help navigate some of the challenging aspects that arise in the context of youth ministry. The heart of the shepherd is for the sheep, this is God's heart for us, and it is this heart that must be reflected through us as we minister to this young flock.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Muggeridge, Malcom. Quoted in Donald McCullough, *Waking from the American Dream*. Downers Grove: Illinois, InterVarsity Press. 1988. Pg 145

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> See James 1:2-4