

Hebrews 12:3-11

“What Kind of Father is God?”

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2nd Sunday before Easter

Our sermon text this morning as we continue our series through the epistle to the Hebrews, is found in Hebrews 12:3-11. I invite you to listen carefully now to God’s word. This text is printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to follow along there.

*3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. 4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?*

*“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,  
nor be weary when reproved by him.*

*6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,  
and chastises every son whom he receives.”*

*7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

*Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

What kind of Father is God?

Now, many of us know the “right” theological or doctrinal answer to that question - but what I’m interested in most is how your heart answers that question - what you sense to be true, in your heart, when you understand God’s claim to be your father, and you look at the experience of your life under his fatherly hand.

What kind of Father is God?

That, it seems to me, is one of the most intimate and one most important and revelatory of all the questions we might ask ourselves about God. Is my Heavenly Father good? Is he loving? All the time? Really? Or is he absent? Is he cruel? Can I trust my Father in heaven?

And of course, this question is complicated because of our relationship or lack of relationship with our earthly fathers.

All of us have earthly fathers who were imperfect, and for many us, our fathers were not imperfect - they were unfaithful, and even wicked.

For some of us, our father’s imperfections or unfaithfulness show up primarily in their absence.

Some of us have fathers who simply left, who choose not to fulfill their fatherly calling - whether because of their own selfishness or their weakness - it doesn’t really matter. Either way, there weren’t there.

Or, if they were there, they were so detached and distant and passive that their presence didn't matter much.

For others of us, perhaps a smaller group, the unfaithfulness of our fathers was displayed in their cruelty. Instead of treating us with gentleness and love, our fathers used their role in our lives to shame us, or tear us down with their words, or even abuse us.

And our lives and our hearts are so deeply impacted - because it was not just a generic person who treated us this way - but our father - the one who was supposed to protect and defend us who did this.

Now, for many of us, we had fathers who were imperfect, but still were faithful. Yes, they were occasionally distant and self-absorbed, or they sometimes were short-tempered, but they were generally present and engaged, they were generally loving and kind and supportive.

Friend, if this true for you, if you had an imperfect but faithful father, then give thanks to God for this gift - for there are few gifts in your life so precious or important.

And for those of us who are fathers today, who have living children, no matter their age - meditating on these things should certainly cause us to wrestle with our own calling - our calling to be present, to be engaged with our children, and to communicate to them our love and concern and pride in them as often and as well as we are able.

To be a father is a high and holy calling, and it requires so much of those of us seek to be faithful in it.

One of the primary claims that the Scriptures invite us to wrestle with when we study them is that God is our true Father, and he is faithful and perfect in all of his fatherly actions toward us.

Indeed, what the Scriptures argue again and again is that, while our earthly fathers may be absent or cruel, God is not these things.

No, God is a father who is always present with us - he is engaged in every detail of our lives, and his presence is always good and loving and worthy of our trust and gratitude.

Indeed, biblical speaking, one of the most basic definitions of faith is trusting in the goodness and faithfulness of God as our Father.

Nowhere is this argument about the faithful Fatherhood of God more front and center in the Scriptures than in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Jesus' whole ministry is predicated on the assumption that his Father loves him, is with him always, and is absolutely trustworthy. At his baptism, the Father's voice speaks from heaven and names Jesus as his beloved Son, and it is this belovedness of the Father that sustains and strengthens Jesus in all that he does.

When Jesus faces his death he knows his Father is still with him - he will not be abandoned - as he tells his disciples, they will scatter, "yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me." And his last words before his death on the cross, as recorded by the gospel of Luke, are simply these: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"

And a fundamental aspect of Jesus' teaching is to invite those who put their faith in him to embrace his own understanding of God as their father.

He teaches his disciples to pray in a radically new way by saying, in direct and intimate address, "Our Father," and he explains again and again, in teaching after teaching and story after story that God's fatherliness is trustworthy, as summarized in our gospel reading this morning, were he told his disciples:

*“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”*

And of these things, our complicated relationship with our own fathers, as well as the true nature of God’s identity as our heavenly father as revealed by Jesus, stands behind our text in Hebrews this morning.

Consider Jesus, the apostle says, and do not grow weary as you struggle against sin in your lives. Remember Jesus’ steadfastness. Remember Jesus’ trust in his Father, even in the midst of his suffering.

And then the Apostle asks his readers this penetrating question. He says in verse 5, *“Have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?”* Don’t forget that you are sons, he says. And don’t forget that you have a Heavenly Father - a father who is with you and who loves you.

And then he quotes these words from Proverbs 3:

*“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,  
nor be weary when reproved by him.  
For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,  
and chastises every son whom he receives.”*

And then he summarizes the meaning of the Proverbs quotation in verse 7, writing: *“It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons.”*

With these words, the Apostle is challenging us in our perception of what it means for God to be our father. For God is not simply a Father that pats us on the head and tells us that everything we do is amazing.

No, our heavenly Father intends something better than that for us.

His love for us is so fierce, and so faithful that he wants us to grow up and mature and be like him. As the Apostle says in verse 10, he wants for us to share in his holiness. And for this reason, he disciplines us - and disciplines not as an employer or as a teacher or as a judge, but as a father.

What is this discipline our heavenly Father has for us as his children?

The Greek word used again and again in his passage is *paideia*, and its definition is something like “the act of providing guidance or correction for godly living.”

What it means basically, is that God does not intend to leave us alone in our sin and in our immaturity, but as our Father, he actively intervenes again and again in our lives, bringing correction, bringing reproof, and even chastisement into our experience so that we will grow up and be made holy.

As the Apostle explains, this is the calling of any faithful father.

Fathers are not called to be passive observers of their children, but to be involved, to challenge their sons and daughters, to confront and correct them when necessary, and to call them on to greater strength and maturity.

And, the apostle’s argument is that while our earthly fathers disciplined us imperfectly, our father in heaven embraces this task with perfect love and perfect faithfulness.

So what does this discipline look like in our lives as children of our heavenly Father?

Although it is not necessarily popular to speak in these terms about God today, a central part of our Heavenly Father's discipline in our lives is that he will bring correction into our lives due to our sin.

And this, it seems to me, is the primary sense in which the Apostle is using the term "discipline" in our passage this morning.

Consider that this whole passage occurs in the context of putting off sin our lives.

In verse 1, remember, the Apostle tells us we are to put off the sin which clings closely, and in verse 4, he reminds his readers that in their struggle with sin they have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood.

And then, the quotation from Proverbs that he uses includes as God's fatherly care for us his action of reproofing us and chastising us.

Friends, this conclusion is unavoidable.

One of the ways that your heavenly Father will discipline you is that he will bring correction into your life because of your sin.

And what good news this is!

Can you imagine how hopeless our situation would be in terms of our holiness in this life if God simply left it up to us to decide how we handle our sin?

But if God is your father, you will soon discover that God has a way of finding out your sin - bringing your sin to the surface and correcting you in it.

Sometimes this is incredibly painful.

Think for example, of the man or woman who has long nurtured an unhealthy relationship with alcohol, but then, finally, one day, they see the flashing lights in their rearview mirror and they find themselves in a jail cell facing the exposure of their sin in a way they never have before.

Friends, if you ever find yourself in a situation like that, you might be tempted to believe that your life is over.

It is so painful to be discovered in our sin.

It can feel so unfair, so cruel, so unloving for God to expose us like this. And it can happen in so many ways - I've only mentioned one dramatic example.

And the sin we're discovered in doesn't have to be alcohol - it can be anger or selfishness or bitterness or envy or pornography or an addiction or a habit of lying or a financial sin, or a weakness like passivity or cowardice or despair or a lack of faith.

And the number of ways we can be found out is as myriad as the variety of our sins.

Sometimes it will be a dramatic situation. Sometimes it will be as normal as a revelatory conversation with a friend or spouse where we see and understand and are confronted the reality of a particular sin for the first time. Sometimes it will be someone with the authority to do it simply calling us to account for the decisions we've made.

But friends, if you follow Jesus, I can promise you this.

God will not leave you alone in your sin. He will, lovingly, gently, firmly, find you in it.

And he will expose it, not only to you, but to others. Because he loves you, he will correct you. He will reprove you. He will chastise you.

But, beloved, what I want to you see and believe, is that even in the most difficult situation where you are brought face to face with the reality of your sin, your life is not over.

No, I would argue - it is in that moment that God's kindness is most prominently displayed for you, for it is in that moment of exposure and correction that a new life is available for you - a life of holiness, a life of repentance, a life of integrity - a life that looks a great deal more like the life of Jesus than the one you lived before.

Now, it is important to say, that I don't believe that the Apostle is arguing that God brings difficulty into our lives in order to *punish* us for our sins. No, the punishment for our sins was, of course, poured out on the Son of God at the cross.

But I very much believe that the apostle is plainly showing us here that God will often bring correction into our lives due to our sins - whether those sins are active rebellion, or simply a passive immaturity, and often that discipline, that *paideia*, that we receive from our Heavenly Father's hand will be painful.

The exposure we feel when our sins are revealed to ourselves and others by our Father. The humility we feel when we are confronted by our Father with our true selves, and our true weaknesses. The longing we feel when our Father shows us how holy he means to make us, and how far we have to go. All of it is painful. A holy pain, perhaps. But painful nonetheless.

And how could it be any other way? As the Apostle says in verses 10-11:

*[Our earthly fathers] disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but [our heavenly Father] disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

This friends, is the astounding intention of your Heavenly Father for you. That you, sinful though you are, would share his holiness. That you, weak though you are, would yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

So many of us, left on our own, would be content with a tiny little spark of holiness and maturity.

But our Heavenly Father loves us so much that he intends us to burn, to be set on fire with the holiness of God, and he is faithful and intentional enough to grant us this glorious gift.

That is how kind, how faithful a Father he is to his sons and daughters.

C. S. Lewis, in his great work, Mere Christianity provides us with a powerful illustration for the kind of work that our Heavenly Father is up to in our lives, the kind of thing that the Apostle is speaking about here in Hebrews 12.

He writes: *"Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to?*

*The explanation is that God is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. For God intends to come and live in it Himself."*

Beloved, this is the journey that we are all on together. We are being made into dwelling places for the Living God.

Is it painful? Yes.

But is it also glorious? Yes, indeed. More than we can even imagine.

So, beloved, hear the voice of God today. Do not grow weary or fainthearted.

For you can be sure that whatever your Heavenly Father is doing in your life today, he is treating you as a son, as a daughter.

And he intends more than you could ever imagine on your own. He intends to make you holy.

He intends, in all the painful discipline you experience from his hand, to make you to be set on fire with the holiness of God.

And he is such a Faithful and Loving Father that nothing, not even you, will stop him from doing what he intends.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.