

## May 14 , 2006 • "Hebrews, Pt. 19; Tough Love"

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Hebrews, chapter 12, let's get there. Michael Bleecker, our worship leader, for my daughter's third birthday, gave her his copy of "Beauty and the Beast." I'm really not kidding at all. He owned it. He still hasn't given me an adequate explanation for that. But he owned "Beauty and the Beast" and a couple other cartoons and gave "Beauty and the Beast" to my daughter. My daughter loves "Beauty and the Beast" the cartoon, but she only likes parts of it. It's not one of those DVD's that you can put on to babysit your kid while you do something else around the house, if we did such things. It's got some scary scenes in it, and to be honest, there are large portions of it that she doesn't like at all. And then there are portions of it that she really likes. Like she really, really, really likes the beginning when Belle is walking through the town, singing and getting her book, and she really likes the part when Belle comes down the staircase in her golden gown and dances with, she doesn't call it the beast, she calls it the "big dog." And she likes the scene where Belle takes the seeds and puts in in the big dog's paw, and the birds eat out of the big dog's paw. But outside of that, she's done. She doesn't like the scary beginning, and she doesn't like Gaston at all. Well, the other part that she really, really likes is when the dinner setting dances and celebrates that there's a guest in the castle. Some of you are not with me at all. I don't care, alright. You'll get me here in a minute. She likes certain scenes, but that's all she likes. She doesn't like the dark scenes where the beast is really mean and aggressive at the beginning. And she doesn't like when Gaston and the beast fight. It scares her. It unnerves her. She doesn't like to look at it. So, she just likes the pretty part. But here's the thing, because the only thing she sees is the pretty part, she doesn't understand the story. Like she doesn't get that this was a man who was cruel to an enchantress...I almost feel sorry for myself right now. Like, how do I know this?...a man that was cruel to an enchantress and was changed into a beast. She thinks it's a dog in a suit that dances with a beautiful girl. She doesn't get the story. So, the thing is that I probably ruin everything for my daughter, because I'm always trying to point to the redemptive trait in everything. I'm like, "Do you understand what's going on here?" She's three. She's like, "Yeah, a girl's dancing with a dog." I'm like, "No, what's happening is strife and repair." And so, I know I just ruin everything for her, but she misses, she doesn't understand the story. She doesn't get it. Like she doesn't get that this was a man who has been deformed and only love can bring him back around. Like she doesn't get that storyline at all. She just knows that there's this fun girl who gets to wear cool dresses, who dances with a very large dog. And that's the extent of "Beauty and the Beast" to my daughter. And I got to thinking. I really wasn't going to intro this like this at all until Audrey and I started watching it last night, and she's like, "Oh, fast forward. I don't want to..." And we went to dancing in the town with the books to the silverware celebrating her arrival at the enchanted castle to the end where they live happily ever after, and she wanted none of the hard parts. She wanted to see none of the difficult parts.

And I got to thinking, knowing that what I was preaching on this weekend, was this is exactly how we are a Evangelicals. I mean, we love the happy parts. We love that God is gracious and loving, and He's about restoration, and He's about hope, and we love to hear these things about God. In fact, we'll come to church and hear about that God because He's very pretty and very nice, and He's very much about us. And so, we like hearing about that God. We don't, however, like hearing about other parts of His attributes that might be a little scarier for us. We have been, either on purpose or by accident, conditioned to view God incompletely. It is no small chance that the two most popular books among Evangelicals the last 10 years has been a book about your territory being expanded and God sucking

you out of this world before you have to suffer. It is no small thing that those are the two most popular books among Christians in the last decade. We, just like my daughter, love the happy scenes and don't like to wrestle with difficult things.

I am very committed to preaching through the Bible in my tenure here with you. I think I'm here for the next 30 or 40 years, and I am planning on attacking every book in this book in that 30 or 40 years together, if I survive. The thing about preaching through books...I actually heard a man at a church growth conference call it lazy. The thing about preaching through books in the Bible is it won't let you dodge the hard things. Like tonight, we're in Hebrews 12...very unbelievably difficult text. And because I told you we were going to preach through Hebrews, I can't now skip that. I can't say, "Now, not ALL of Hebrews, just the fun part." If you don't know the hard part, you don't know the whole story. Are you tracking with me? Like, if you don't know the hard parts, then it's just a girl in a pretty dress dancing with a big dog. And I tell you this all the time: I am not interested in growing us wide. I am interested in growing us deep. Because if deep happens, wide follows. My question has always been, "If you're not preaching deeply, what are you saving people to? What, being good? We've already been trying that. It has not gone well for us."

So, that brings us to tonight. It is heavy, it is weighty, and it is God. So, now that you're beaming with anticipation and excitement, let's get after it. Hebrews chapter 12, we'll start in verse 3. Tonight's going to be hard because this is off the Evangelical radar. It just is. Here we go, verse 3, "*For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*" Now, if you'll remember when we started this study, we said that this book was being written to Christians who were being culturally attacked. The culture that they find themselves in was very antagonistic and violent towards the gospel. And so, they were being put in prison, they were having their stuff stolen from them, they were having the right to buy and sell removed from them. It was a very, very, very difficult time. And so, really we've gone through 11 chapters, and God has not addressed their suffering yet. And now in 12, He's going to address their suffering, and what He says about it is off of most of our radars. So, He's saying here, right in verse 3, He's saying consider Him who has endured such things. The same hostility that you now are enduring, Jesus Himself endured. That's the comparison here.

But look at verse 4, "*You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin;...*" Two He's saying, "Okay, you do have it bad, things are very difficult for you right now, there are sinful men harming you, and you're got it bad. I'm not trying to say you don't have it bad. You have it bad, but you have not resisted to the point of Christ who was killed or even those in Hebrews 11 that were mentioned that were sawn in two or tortured and stoned and those kind of things. So yes, you are enduring some of the same hostility from sinners that Jesus endured, but you haven't endured to the point of death in your striving against sin." Now, I want to ask you a question that's going to shake this thing: Whose sin are they striving against? Not theirs, the sin of others. They're not striving against their own sin, they're striving against the sin of others. That the sin of other men, the violent acts of men are being put onto them. This is not their sin. This is not saying, "You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against your own sin." Alright, this isn't about self mortification. He's saying, "You have not, in your battle with other people's sinful behavior, resisted to the point of shedding blood."

Now, here's where this thing is going to go off the radar for most of us. It's going to go off the radar. And I know it is, because you can't preach this text and grow a church quickly. I know you can't. And there has never been a church growth book or a church growth conference where anyone said, "Preach Hebrews 12 faithfully." Because this thing's going to get hard. Let's look at this, "*You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord..."*" Now, let me do a little word smithing here for you. This word "discipline" here is not punishment, it is training. So, do not regard lightly the training of the Lord. Now, you're going to have to think punishment here in a minute, because He's going to say that. So, here we go, "...*nor faint when you are reprovved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges all those He calls sons.*" So, He starts outside by saying, "Hey, don't take lightly the discipline, oh and that's not punishment and He does punish. He scourges those He calls sons." Now let me tell you why this thing is off the chart for most of us. What just happened in this text is the Scriptures just said that the sinful acts of other men and women pressed on believers in Christ was ultimately whose action? God's. Whew. The violent aggression of men and women towards believers, God just said, "That came from Me." Anyone else have some problems with this? It's not just me? It's hard, isn't it?

So, I'm reading this, and began to wrestle and ask the question, "Why in the world is this here? Why is God playing it like this? Why is it happening like this?" And the good news is He doesn't abandon us to wonder. He answers the question. Starting in verse 6, "*For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure...*" Okay, so now we're getting some insight here. Because remember, He lists two things above this. He says that suffering and difficulty and hardship and pain are either training from God for the saint or they are punishment from God. And we just found out that for the Hebrews too, those who received this book, it's not punishment, but it's training. It is for training that you endure. "*God deals with you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? 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...*" So, hear me, because I think there's this horrible thing placed on us that, because we know Jesus, we always have to be alright. And we always have to smile and things always have to be great, even when they're not. And Scripture says, "Hey listen, when God trains, when He reprovves, when He disciplines, when He scourges, it is not pleasant."

In the national title game, USC vs. the University of Texas, right near the end of the game, Vince Young rolls right, the strong safety blitzes to the inside rather than the outside, the tackle slams him in, Vince rolls out to the outside, walks into the end zone. And from the back camera, you watch Vince Young score and you see the USC cheerleaders along the back row, and the cheerleader from the farthest left celebrates the touchdown. Anybody seen this picture on the net? So, Vince Young scores and all of USC's hopes and dreams for a three-peat go down in flames, and the USC cheerleader celebrates. And there is a picture of Vince scoring the touchdown and this girl celebrating the absolute destruction of all USC hoped for. And I couldn't help but think, "That's us! 'Oh, this is miserable! Spirit sprinkle!'" It's not always chipper. Sometimes life stings. We don't celebrate. You don't have to pretend to be alright. You hear me? If you're not alright, the worst thing you can do is pretend that you are. Because

nobody's going to know to encourage you and you could be dying on the inside. If you're dying on the inside, you need to be dying on the outside. You need to flush so much of this religious jargon garbage down the toilet. Jesus loved honest people, even honest people who were so ashamed of what they were being honest about that they couldn't talk to him, they could only sob. "The broken and contrite in spirit, I do not despise."

Here's something that I've picked up. What I've noticed is that because we've been taught that if we're good, God will bless us. Haven't we been taught that? If we obey and we do good and we do right, everything will go well for us. And so, what ends up happening is when that doesn't happen, because here is the irony of that teaching...You want to hear the irony of that teaching? Life. That's the irony of that teaching. If you do right, if you do good, everything will work out well and everything will be happy and every part of your life will be unbelievably blessed, financially and with your marriage and with children. And the irony of that teaching is that life absolutely calls that teaching lie. Life does. And so, here's what happens to us. Because either subversively or on the top, we've been taught that, when difficulties or hardship or pain happen, we immediately begin to think God is disappointed, frustrated or angry with us and He must be punishing us. "We must be under His wrath. Why else would I lose my job? He must be angry with me. Why else are there things difficult in my marriage? He must be frustrated." So, we run right back to the tabernacle. "Okay, here's what I'll do. I'll do this for You and this for You and this for You, and You'll make things right."

I think one of the problems is we kind of repackaged what wrath is. Like, everybody's quick to attribute wrath to the big crazy things. Like a dude walks out and gets struck by lightning, and we're like, "Oh ho ho ho! You should have been right." Or a hurricane or tornado or some cataclysmic natural disaster. Everybody's quick to hop on the wrath of God on that one. But I want you to know that the wrath of God as defined by Romans 1 is much, much, much less on the news than that and I think more terrifying. Keep your finger here, and I'll show you wrath so you can get really what wrath is. Go to Romans 1:18. "*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,...*" Okay, so what this text is dealing with is how the wrath of God is unpacked towards a sinful world. It begins to list out how that wrath works itself out. What I want you to notice is verse 28, because verse 28 is more terrifying than lightning. Look at verse 28, "*And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,...*" which is very interesting to put right there. "They are inventors of evil, and they don't make their bed." It's just a weird one for us. "They murder and do not vacuum." Here we go, "*...without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.*" According to this text, the wrath of God is not just Him seeing something sinful and attacking it, but the wrath of God is Him seeing something sinful and doing nothing, which is much more terrifying to me than a lightning bolt. The wrath of God works itself out every time He doesn't intervene to keep you from sinning. Have you ever been right on the cusp of doing more than you ever thought you could do and were saved by some circumstance? That's the grace and mercy of God. Where He does not intervene, you've got wrath, punishment.

And I know that there's a theological framework probably in here that says, "God doesn't stop people from sinning. It's all about your choice to do it or not." Well, that would be a great idea except for Scripture. Like I'll give you the example. Abraham knows he's got an attractive wife. He walks into Abimelech's kingdom and goes, "I've got an attractive wife. The king is going to want my wife, and he's going to kill me and take my wife." So he has this horrible idea and takes his wife to coffee and says, "Let's lie and say you're my sister." So then, the king goes, "Oh, that's your sister? She's hot." This is a paraphrase by the way. And he then takes Sarah as his wife, God comes to him in a dream and says, "I'm probably going to destroy your kingdom tomorrow." And he goes, "Why? What are you talking about? Why would you destroy my kingdom?" "Because I know you're trying to take another man's wife. She's already got a husband." And Abimelech's like, "Hey listen, I didn't know that." And God's goes, "I know. I've come because I'm not going to let you sin against Me today." God shows up and is like, "Yeah, I know you've got a wicked heart and you're wanting to sin here. Not so much today. I'm going to make you do right today." Yeah. God shows up and goes, "I'm not going to let you sin." Could the wrath of God go well beyond lightning bolts and storms? And could the wrath of God be Him passively turning you over to do those things which are not proper? It's a scary idea to me. Okay, so why? We're not under wrath, we're under mercy. You and I have not been appointed to suffer wrath. So why then hardship? Why then suffering? Why then difficulty? Look back with me, *"for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines."*

We live in a different day. I don't know when it started, I don't know who started it, but people are having a very difficult time with their children today. Somewhere along the way, young parents have become convinced that it is more important to be your child's friend than it is to train your child to maturity. And where that got confused, this illustration gets lost. And listen, I get it. I want my daughter to like me. I don't want her to just love me; I want her to like me. I want her to want to hang out with me. I want her to want to play. I want her to like me, but God's call on my life as her father is not to be her friend, it is to have a higher degree of love for her than I do for my own comfort. And that means that sometimes I have to be the enemy. And sometimes I have to inflict pain. Not physical pain...sometimes. But sometimes it's just...you know, I make fun of the "time out" thing all the time just because I'm bitter we didn't have "time out" when I was a kid. We had "your dad knocking you out." That was "time out" alright. I mean, if you were on the ground, unconscious, that was "time out." That was "time out" in the 70's. So, I'm a little bitter, alright. Because my folks are here tonight. I dream of, "Go to the corner and think about that." "Okay! I'm horrible." I mean, I would have died for that kind of discipline. "Please make me think about it. I thought about it before I did it actually. I'm shady like that. I knew exactly what I was doing." We use the "time out" thing honestly on my daughter because she would rather be spanked than be put in the corner. It should be a fun fifteen years. It is a higher degree of love to put boundaries around my daughter for her own maturity and safety.

On Monday of this last week, Lauren and I hopped a plane, it was our first time away from the kids, and headed to Seattle. I was teaching up there at a conference. It was Lauren's and my first time away from our kids really for more than a few hours. I had been away before, but not with Lauren and it's kind of this real joy/sorrow thing that occurs in that moment. And then just the weird things you have to do. Like I'm having to give my mom my will and my insurance in case something happened and "call these numbers if something goes bad" and I mean, it's just a weird deal to do for the first time. It's kind of nerve-wracking if you will. And we flew back in on Friday, and we have done nothing since we got

back in on Friday but play with our kids. I mean, on Saturday, we went to the park, we played in the hose for about an hour. It's a poor man's pool. And we started up the sprinklers and ran through that. We have done nothing but love on and play with my daughter. And I will tell you this: my daughter has been unbelievably not my daughter since we got home. Lauren has this vase with tulips in it that's really heavy sitting on our breakfast room table, and Audrey kept picking that vase up. In fact, my dad was actually in the room when she did this. She kept picking up this tulip-y vase, and I told her like forty times to quit it. And so I was like, "Listen to me. If you touch that vase again, I'm going to swat you." So, she puts the vase down, looks directly at me, and it sits on this piece of fabric, she grabs the fabric and picks the vase up by the fabric. "Dang it! Why didn't I say, 'Don't touch any of it?'" She's finding the loophole already. I love her, but she's shady already. I mean, you can't ask my daughter in a command. You can't say, "Hey will you pick up your toys?" Because she'd be like, "Naw, I'm alright." And you're like, "I'm not asking you. Pick up your toys." So, we're having to learn these things. Now, that is not my daughter. We have worked very hard to make my daughter afraid of the street. That's a good kind of fear. We live on a corner; people are always flying by it. So, if there's a dead animal in the street, we're like, "Come here and look at this. That's what happens..." Just kidding, we don't do that. Our thing is: therapy later is better than death now. And so, we've worked well at scaring her of the street. But I'm telling you, yesterday we were in the front yard and she runs right out into the street, turns around and opens up our mailbox. I mean, she is doing things that she historically has not done, because in here weird way she is saying, "Do you still love me? Are you still here? Are you still here to keep me safe? Are you going to protect me?" And she is begging me for boundaries. Why? Because it's there that she feels safe and she feels loved. It is. And God's going, "I love you. That's why this is happening. Because it requires a greater level of love for Me to press you like this than for Me to just leave you alone." Have you ever been around a kid that hasn't been disciplined? How adequately set is he for life? I mean, you have absolutely insured destruction and failure in the future. Have you not? You absolutely have. And God goes, "I love you too much for that. I love you too much for that, so I will wound you." And it's a very difficult idea, but it's absolutely here.

And His affliction, the sorrow that He'll place on your head and mine, it produces, it has a point. It's not just there for the training's sake, it has a point. Look at it. I don't have to make this up. He says it for me. Look in verse 10, "*For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good...*" Now, I'm going to plead with you, and I know the majority of you will not believe this, but for some, for those who have had the veil lifted you'll hear me. God is more about your good than you are. Did you hear me on this? God is more about your good than you are. So, let's read, "*...for our good, so that we may share His holiness.*" That there's something that occurs in suffering that brings about the fullness of holiness. There's something about suffering that detaches our love from the things of this world and makes us more and more like Jesus.

Alright, let's keep reading because it's not just for our good, it's not just for our 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.*" I have found where there cannot be joy, God will give peace. I mean, there are moments where joy is impossible to find. I've been there. When you bury six-year-old girls, there is little joy there. Now, you got hope, but joy, it's not there. And everybody likes to dance around this by trying to redefine joy. "No, that's not what joy means...joy means this...all doesn't mean all..." You know, it's a little game you get into, a hermeneutical game if you will. And the truth is where joy seems impossible, God often brings peace. Suffering, pain, hurt,

training brings about holiness, peace, righteousness for our good. Wildly unpopular.

Now, I want you to see this, because look at what He's going to say next. *"Therefore,..."* therefore, since you haven't been abandoned in your pain, therefore, since your pain is not meaningless, therefore, since the difficulties you are enduring are not random but are for your good, your holiness, your righteousness and for the peace of your soul, therefore *"...strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed."* What God's saying here is, "Listen. I am going to do something in here, in your life, in your heart, and if you fight me on it, I'm still going to get you there, but I'm going to break your legs off." I mean, God's going, "Listen. I am that serious about your good, that you had better not brace your feet and try to fight Me. You better straighten up your feet and come where I'm commanding you to come or I'm going to break your legs off." It's not a threat, it's a loving promise. It's not a threat. I mean, God's not trying to scare you, and we'll find that out here in a minute. God's not trying to scare you, He's trying to protect you from you.

Alright, now there are two things that can derail us from this process, or I would say make it much more painful than God intends it to be. There are two things; both are found in this text. Let's take a look at the two things that can derail this process of righteousness, holiness, our goodness, peace working itself into our souls. Let's look at verse 14, *"Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled (or destroyed); that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears."* This reference to Esau is actually a reference back to verse 5. Look at verse 5, *"and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord.'"* Two enemies of our sorrow producing the kind of sanctification that will allow us to see the Lord. Here's what they are: regarding lightly the Lord's discipline and training like Esau and bitterness. Number one, regarding lightly the discipline of the Lord. Esau came in from the fields starving to death. His brother had made stew. Esau was an heir to the covenant God had made to Abraham for the entire world to be blessed through his bloodline. Esau traded what God was going to do through him and in him to feed his stomach or his desire.

So, let me try to explain this, how you take the Lord's discipline lightly. When you use your sorrow and difficulty and hardship as a justification to live sinfully, you have taken lightly the discipline of the Lord. Here's how it works. What I have found is that men and women will do one of two things: One way is, they'll say, "Well, I'm struggling with this, I have these desires. God made me. And so, how can God judge me if He's the one that gave me these sinful desires." Justified sin. And you have used what God meant do draw you unto Him to push yourself away from Him. You have regarded lightly what He's trying to accomplish. You have traded what He wished to accomplish in you to feed your stomach, your lusts, your desires. Or, another way I see it work is when hardship or difficulty occurs, men and women will have this sinful outlet. Like, I can't tell you how many guys blame their porn addictions on their wives. I'm not kidding. I can't tell you how many men blame their addiction to pornography and sexual deviance on their wives. "Well, things are hard in the marriage, things are difficult in the marriage. This isn't really cheating. This makes me..." Or how many women and men have these...this kind of blows my mind lately. It's just been such a theme running through our

community, that there are these men and women having these online relationships, where they're emotionally connected to other people that are not their spouses. And they're justifying those relationships because of the difficulties in their current relationship. A) That's not helping. I mean, that's not a way to breathe life back into your marriage. And B), more importantly, you are neglecting and robbing and regarding lightly the very purpose of the difficulties in your marriage, to sanctify you, to make you holy. "Well, I don't have anywhere to run." That's a lie. Christ was slaughtered on the cross, so you could have always someone to run to. Always. And regarding lightly the Lord's discipline is when you and I use the difficulties of our lives as an excuse to sin, as an excuse and as a justifying trump card to the will of God in your life. So, "I'm hurting, I'm tired, I need to feel better, I'll sin." Which, by the way, never works out in the long run. It always brings more sorrow and more pain. And then in the end, God gets you where He wanted to get you the whole time anyway. It's just there's all this suffering there. Except what usually what ends up happening is your sin has to go public. Alright, so the first thing that robs, that stops, that slows down this process of righteousness, holiness, peace is using the difficulties of your life as justification to sin when God put them in your life to grow you and mature you.

Number two: bitterness. I'm reading a book right now by David Wells who's this unbelievably smart man. Like I have to read his book with a thesaurus next to me. He like puts big words for "this." You know, just the kind of guy I'd like to punch in the face. He's talking about Christ in a post-modern world, and he's mentioning all these philosophers. And did you know that it's his conclusion that we are the first generation that has ever lived that has embraced the idea that we can be completely and wholly happy in this life. We are the first generation who has lived that is not living for the next generation. We're living for ourselves and ourselves alone. And Wells asks the question, "How's that working out for us?" It's not. It's gone horribly, horribly wrong. So, what happens when there is an expectation in your soul that everything is about you and you can be supremely happy and you should never have to suffer and there should never be difficulties and things should always go well for you, and things happen that don't line up with that? Then the first place most people look is other people to find out why they're not fulfilling their own hearts. "Okay, what is my wife not doing to make me happy? I'm not happy. So, somebody's to blame for this. I mean, it's not me. Somebody's to blame." And so, then you begin to do that thing where, "Well, if my wife would just do this, this, this and this...If I could just get this much more money...If this circumstance would just change...If this person would just.... then I would finally be happy." And what ends up happening is the root of bitterness takes root, breaks ground and begins to destroy everything around you. Bitterness is a horrific disease of the soul. Because you defile everything you touch when you're bitter. Like, you're just looking around and waiting for some joyous occasion so you can destroy it. It's what happens. Bitterness takes root, "I don't deserve this...I can't believe this is happening to me...If there was a God in heaven, He would never let happen..." And you begin to be bitter and angry towards others and towards God. And you begin to rail at a God who loves you so deeply that, although He longs to bless you with every spiritual thing in the heavens, He will not do so at your own destruction. Instead, He allows you to suffer so that you might fully know Him. And then, you find yourself railing against and becoming bitter towards the love of God. Damaging, so damaging to the soul.

Alright, so now at this point in the sermon, I know most of you are going, "Pish! Happy Mother's Day." Well, it gets better. Let's look at verse 18, "*For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet*

*and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned." And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I am full of fear and trembling." This is a reference to Moses bringing the people out of Egypt, and they get to Mt. Sinai and God begins to speak to all of Israel and they are absolutely horrified by this. And so, they beg God not to speak to them anymore. Can you imagine? For all of us today are like, "Speak to me, speak to me, speak to me." Israel here is like, "Never mind," and then tries to pawn it off on Moses. They're like, "Moses, we don't want to talk to Him. He's too scary. You go talk to Him." And Moses, you can see, he's not really giddy about the opportunity. He says, "I am fearful and full of trembling." And then he goes, and he would hear from the Lord and then come back and the rule was that if anything touched Sinai, it was defiling Sinai and had to be killed. And so, it was this kind of dangerous, deadly, terrifying place. And the Scriptures just said, "That's not where you live anymore." Let's look at verse 22, "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel. See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking."*

This whole thing might be difficult for you. This whole thing might be difficult for you, because what conjures up in your mind when I say the word "father" and "discipline" are not wholly right or good. My daughter, when we're on the couch and I put my arm around her, she doesn't flinch. She doesn't go, "Ahh!" She doesn't. She smiles and scoots in for the cuddle. She does not walk around our house just wondering when dad is going to snap. In fact, I can tell you this. There's probably been only two to three moments in here life so far where I reacted instead of responded. And then, I was so devastated about my own sinfulness that I am apologizing to a one and a half year old. "Your daddy is a fool. I am so sorry." Then she starts crying because I'm crying. It was weird, alright. It was weird, but it needed to be done. My daughter is not nervous around me. She does not fear me. She doesn't. And I know, here we go with the, "There should be a good kind of fear." Okay, there is. But she does not get into the pantry and wonder if, in one fatal swoop, I'm going to snap and beat the trash out of her because she got into the pantry. She doesn't.

You are not on Mt. Sinai. God is not watching you, waiting to react violently and with wrath to all your mistakes. That is not where we are. God is not in the heavens, watching you wake up, judging how you got dressed, what you wore. "Oh, that was a huge breakfast. That's gluttonous. I'm going to have to strike you down now. Because I'm tired of it. I mean, I got this Iraq thing over here, I've got this going on in this part of the world. People don't even like me in Africa. I've had it! Bam!" And you're the one who receives the blow up of all His frustrations. We're giggling, but I think that's how most of us kind of view Him, that we're on Mt. Sinai. That we had better watch it, because anytime anything goes bad, God's frustrated and enraged. You're not on Mt. Sinai; you're in Zion, where suffering, if it's there, is a gift birthed out of love for the hope of your own good. And you do not have a Father that reacts to you, but whose plan for you goes well beyond today, who has coveted with his blood to never push you beyond what you can bear, and whose commitment to your good and His glory is so great that He killed His own Son. This is our Father. So don't ignore Him if you hear Him. Your good, your holiness, your peace, your righteousness, this is what the weight of your life was meant to produce.

J.I. Packer, one of my favorite authors, says, “Still He seeks the fellowship of His people, and sends them both sorrows and joys in order to detach their love from other things and attach it to Himself.” This may not be popular, but it is true.

Let us pray, “I pray that You would sear into the really deep places of our hearts that You are for our good, that You have not, as You say in Your Scriptures, appointed us to suffer wrath, but mercy. And I ask for forgiveness, because I think we defined mercy instead of letting You define it. Because sometimes mercy is tears. Sometimes mercy is sorrow. And I think if we were really honest and we didn't just react to the things that have been said tonight, but if we really thought deeply about it, the times when we've grown closest to You, the times that we've felt You the closest, the times that we've really experienced the fullness of You or the moments where we're just frustrated out of our mind or hurting out of our mind. I thank You that You do not allow me to decide what is good for me. I think about how unloving that would be for an earthly father to behave that way, to let his three-year-old daughter decide what's good for her. I think about how badly she would hurt herself. I think about how confident she would be about her decisions, no matter how poor they were. I thank You that You love us too much to let us decide what's good for us. You who are infinite, You who were and are and will always be, You, omnipotent, omnipresent, almighty God, You send us exactly what we need. And I thank You that You even give us permission here in the text not to like that while it's happening. I pray for my brothers and sisters in this room who find themselves in a difficult place in life, who find themselves tired or alone or sick or caught up in a struggle of inward sin that seems to be demoralizing. I pray that this text has the aroma of life in it for them. I've found that this text seems to be really offensive to people who don't struggle and don't hurt, but it seems to be really life giving to those who do. So, I pray for peace if joy is impossible. I pray that as we leave this place and we get into our cars and we head home or head to dinner that we would be overwhelmed with the kind of heavenly Father that we have. For those in here who had such a tough go, still have a tough go with their earthly father, I pray that You would transcend and cover. I know these things are hard, and I know they are offensive. And so, if there are young Christians in here who find this horribly offensive, I pray that You would protect. I pray that where there is bitterness, You would reveal it. And I pray, Father, that where there has been men and women using their difficulty as a justification for sin, You might break our hearts over our foolishness. I thank You for the harder texts that explain the story more in its fullness. So that, instead of seeing the pretty dress and big dog, we see the redemptive power of love. I pray that we might be in awe of You tonight as we leave here. And it's for Your beautiful name that I ask these things. Amen.”