

Tough Love

Rich Nathan

April 30 & May 1, 2016

The Father Loves You

Hebrews 12:4-11

I'm going to start with a very sad story. A woman named Breanna swerved off the road one night in front of a home owned by the Boyles family. The reason she swerved off the road is because a tire blew on her car. Breanna was a 24-year old chef at a private club and she had been working late that night doing what she loved, which was cooking. A few members of the Boyles family went out to help Breanna. This included parents: Hollie and Eric Boyles, along with their 21-year old daughter, Shelby.

Within minutes, Brian Jennings, who was a youth pastor and was returning from his son's graduation party, stopped his pickup along the side of the road and offered to help Breanna and the Boyles family. Breanna called her mom and told her that she would be delayed, but not to worry, there were some really nice people helping her change the tire of her car.

While Breanna was on the phone, a red Ford F-350 going more than 70 mph, barreled out of the darkness and slammed into Breanna, Hollie, Shelby and Brian – killing them all. The truck loaded with six teenagers in the cab and two in the back, hit Brian's car throwing two of the teenagers out of the back of pickup and permanently paralyzing one of them.

The driver of the F-350 was a 16-year old boy named Ethan Couch. His blood alcohol level was three times the legal limit for an adult. He also had Valium and marijuana in his system. Ethan pled guilty to four counts of intoxication manslaughter, but his defense lawyers presented a surprising argument during his sentencing hearing. Describing how the boy had been a victim of his own family's wealth, and how he had grown up without repercussions for bad behavior, a psychologist said he was suffering from

Affluenza

The case and this defense of "affluenza" sparked national outrage. It was on all the talk shows. Affluenza is not a recognized psychiatric diagnosis. It basically boils down to being a spoiled rich kid.

After three days of testimony, a young man who drove a pickup while drunk and high on drugs killed four people, paralyzed someone else, was sentenced not to prison but to go to a cushy California rehab center and to be on probation for ten years. It's clear that

Ethan's parents gave young Ethan incredible freedom with no regard for the fact that his abuse of alcohol and drugs had escalated for years.

Ethan had previously been picked up when he was 14 for driving drunk, but his parents imposed no consequence for that behavior. He had been stealing the pickup since he was 13 and driving around town. When his mom was asked whether she ever disciplined Ethan for anything, she testified that she thinks she sometimes took away little things from him or would discuss the problem. When she was pressed and asked if she could recall the last time she disciplined her son for anything, Mom replied, "I don't remember."

How many of you would call Ethan's parents' failure to discipline their son, Ethan, after repeatedly driving drunk an act of love? How about if you learned that Mom fled with Ethan to Mexico so that Ethan would escape any consequences for violating his 10-year probation? Would you say that is just a mom showing love to her son?

Does anyone here think that a child raised without any discipline at all is being loved? Is it loving to allow someone you care about to destroy themselves? Is it loving to allow someone you care about to become a thoroughly unlikeable person? Is it loving to allow them to hurt other people and never lift a finger to intervene?

We often think that being loving is opposed to setting boundaries. Or that being loving is the opposite of imposing consequences for bad behavior. In the case of Ethan, the most loving thing that his parents could have done was early on to attempt to short circuit Ethan's self-destructive spiral down before he killed four people, before he paralyzed a friend and before he is now embroiled in the criminal justice system and labeled a felon for life.

Let me share with you a basic rule that applies not only to parents, but to teachers and principals and coaches and anyone who is involved with raising a child. Here's the rule:

A child who has not been disciplined with love by his or her little world will be disciplined without love, by the big world.

The big world, the world of employers and bill collectors and landlords and police and judges and the criminal justice system, will impose discipline wherever a child's little world has failed to discipline with love.

The truth is that Ethan's parents, whatever else they have felt toward their son, did not love him. Love without boundaries is not true love. Love without truth is not true love. Love without discipline is not true love. Love without consequences is not true love. Love without intervention to prevent self-destructive or selfish or thoughtless behavior towards others is not love.

Our Father in Heaven is a perfect lover. When I think of God the Father's love, I am reminded of a prayer that the Apostle Paul prayed for a church that he started in the city of Philippi. Paul said this,

Philippians 1:9-10 (Message)

So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush.

I've been doing a series called "The Father Loves You" for the last month or so. Today, I want to talk to you about a much neglected edge of God the Father's love. Because our Father in Heaven's love is not sentimental gush, instead our Father loves his children enough to discipline us. My message today is called "Tough Love".

Let's Pray.

Hebrews 12:4-11

4 In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,

"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
6 because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son."

7 Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? 8 If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. 9 Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! 10 They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. 11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

You know, it would be nice to believe that Ethan's parents are absolutely unique for shielding their son from every consequence for his misbehavior. But that would be a total lie. Ethan Couch's parents are just an extreme example of a very common phenomenon in American child-raising today. Many American parents, especially suburban, well-educated, affluent parents really struggle to discipline their children.

The Resistance to discipline

It's not uncommon to see preschoolers, ages 4 or 5, running wild in a home or a store grabbing stuff, breaking things, screaming, while mom and dad sit by helplessly. I'm not talking about a 2-year old that's wandering around the house touching everything in sight. I'm talking about a child that's old enough to know how to control themselves. It's not unusual to hear moms and dads making excuses for their out of control kids.

- He's really an active child
- She didn't get enough sleep last night
- They've been under a lot of stress recently
- I haven't spent enough time with them
- Kids will be kids

It's not uncommon to hear elementary or middle-school kids speaking really disrespectfully to their parents in public and to have Mom or Dad just sit there while their kid mouths off to them. Again, we hear the excuses:

- I'm just too tired right now to deal with this
- She won't listen anyway
- I don't want him to think I'm mean
- I'm not always going to be the bad guy. My spouse needs to step up and deal with this

It's not uncommon for teenagers to lie, to cheat on an exam, to fail to study, to use drugs, to get drunk, and to have parents not only not impose consequences, but to run interference for their teenager so that no one else can impose consequences either.

The Atlantic Magazine published an article from a teacher who said:

Thirteen years ago when I was a new teacher I gave a student a 0 on a paper because it had obviously been plagiarized.

The student's mother came in and screamed at the teacher:

Why would you give my daughter a 0? She didn't do anything wrong!

But she did. I was able to find whole paragraphs that were stolen right off of websites on the Internet. She plagiarized.

But the mother's response was:

She didn't do anything wrong, I was the one who copied it. I wrote the paper! Why would you penalize her?

One pastor told me that his wife is a teacher in a local school. She had a student, who after months of class, averaged exactly 20 on his tests. So his wife told the student that it would be better for him if he dropped the class because there was no way mathematically that even if he got a 100 on the final, would he pass the course. The student said: Would you wipe out the record that I ever took the class. The teacher said: No. You are past the 8-week grading period; it is going to appear as an incomplete on your record.

The parents immediately went down to the principal. The principal refused to back up the teacher. He wiped the student's record clean. What did the parents teach their child? What did the principal teach the child? If you make enough fuss, you don't have to take responsibility.

And it's not uncommon for the parents of adults in their 20s or even 30s to be taken hostage by their adult sons and daughters and to try to always rescue them from their legal problems, their substance abuse problems, their marital problems, their financial problems, their employment problems or whatever.

Why do so many of us as parents refuse to discipline our children? Why do we continually enable bad behavior and make excuses for it whether our child is a preschooler or our child is an adult?

There was a fascinating story on NPR recently. A mother called in and she has finally gotten to a place where she has required her son to move out of the house and if he can't get a job because of his problems then to go on Welfare and seek public assistance. The expert on NPR said, "That's great! You're establishing boundaries. You're drawing a line! How old is your son?" The woman said, "My son is 61."

Why do so many of us enable the bad behavior of our children and make excuses for it? I think many of us living at this particular time in history feel extreme guilt if we do not help or bail our children out. Like Ethan Couch's parents, we love our children so much we'd never want them to experience any pain. Sometimes we live in a fantasy world. We think, "Gosh, it's just the first time (even though it's the 50th time or the 500th time) that I've helped out." This one time, if I help, I'll get them over the hump. It's just a loan, I'm sure they'll pay it back. I don't really regard that kind of response as being disrespectful – he's just very verbal and he needs to express his feelings. I don't believe in crushing my son's or my daughter's expressiveness. After all, they were recently ill, they can't be held responsible.

Lie upon lie. Fantasy upon fantasy. The main reason why so many parents are resistant to imposing discipline is that we deeply believe that love is opposed to discipline, that if I really love my child I won't discipline them. I'll never impose any pain or consequences. But, brothers and sisters, love and discipline aren't two different things.

They are two sides of the same coin or, even more accurately, they're the same side of the same coin.

It's not like God your Father moves from pole to pole, sometimes he loves us and sometimes he disciplines us. When he disciplines us, he loves us. When he loves us, he disciplines us. Our father's love is a tough love. It's not just sentimental gush. Our Father's love is always a holy love. God's grace in our lives is always full of truth and his truth in our lives is always full of grace.

We'll explore the Father's tough love towards us in just a moment, but I want to give you some background to the Hebrews 12 text that I just read. This text on God's discipline of his children is set in an interesting context. You see, the writer of the book of Hebrews paints a picture of the Christian life that is so different than the common picture of the Christian life that most 21st century have, whether from within the church or outside the church.

The writer describes the Christian life in Hebrews 11 as a journey of adventure. To live the Christian life, the writer says, is like venturing out into the wilderness. You don't exactly know where God is going to lead you. That's what the patriarchs did, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was like the Lewis and Clarke expedition. You don't know what's around the next bend, you don't know what's over the next mountain or what we're going to see or experience as we follow God's Spirit. Then the writer goes on and says that not only is the Christian life like a journey of adventure, but it's an incredibly hazardous conflict. The Christian life is not just a game that we play in summer camp. It's not a round of golf at an exclusive country club. We're not playing the Christian life by ourselves. There's another team on the field and the Enemy of our souls doesn't play fair and there are casualties and real grief and real suffering.

The writer goes on at the beginning of Hebrews 12 and describes the Christian life as being like a marathon – running the race. Here's what we read in

Hebrews 12:1

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us

Having described the Christian life as a journey of adventure, as a fierce conflict, as a marathon, the writer describes the Christian life as like a wrestling match in the ancient Olympic Games.

Hebrews 12:4

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

How different are the images of the Christian life from the common picture of Christianity in the 21st century. What do churches offer people today? They say, “Come join us on the most exciting adventure ever! You’ll be journeying into the unknown as you learn to follow God’s Spirit. You’ll be facing fierce opposition. Join us as we train for a marathon. This wrestling match of a Christian life is going to take everything you’ve got.”

Or do churches say, “Come join us! We have music that you will like! And the best coffee in town! Come join us! Our chairs are really soft and your bottom will feel really comfortable as you listen to our soloist. Come join us! And maybe you can get involved in a committee meeting. We’ve even got valet parking so you don’t have to walk across our parking lot!”

Who needs discipline for any of that? The pictures that the writer paints of the Christian life sets up his discussion of

The Necessity of discipline

When I read Hebrews 11 and 12, I’m reminded of a speech that Teddy Roosevelt gave back in 1899. The speech was called “The Strenuous Life” and here’s what Roosevelt said:

“I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife; to preach that highest form of success which comes, not to the man [or woman] who desires mere easy peace, but to the person who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph.”

Why does Hebrews 12:4-11 about God’s discipline of us flow naturally from a description of the Christian life as requiring maximum effort? The Christian life demands extraordinary commitment. Without discipline, none of us would succeed in this thing called the Christian life. Without discipline you’ll never finish the journey of adventure. Without discipline you won’t complete the marathon without discipline. You won’t win in the conflict. In fact, you can’t do anything great without great discipline.

Have you read about Steph Curry’s training routine? Steph Curry, for those of you who don’t follow American basketball is the greatest shooter in professional basketball history. No one is even close to him. Have you read about his training routine? In order to be able to focus on two things at once, Steph Curry regularly practices dribbling a basketball with one hand while catching and throwing a tennis ball with the other. Then he dribbles a really heavy basketball with one hand, while dribbling another basketball

through his legs with his other hand. The key to his extraordinary shooting ability is repetition. He shoots and shoots a basketball until he can't shoot anymore. He takes hundreds and hundreds of shots in every practice. Before games, he'll sometimes take 200 shots and then go down to the tunnel where the teams enter the court and take 10 shots from there.

Or consider the training of the greatest Olympian in Olympic history, Michael Phelps, undergoes to win so many Olympic gold medals in swimming. He plans out his routines four years in advance. Then a month before the Olympic trials, he goes to Colorado Springs where he trains at a high altitude. Just eating, sleeping and training. According to an article in a recent sports magazine, here's what Michael Phelps' workouts consist of:

55 practices spread across 23 days, plus daily dryland strength workouts and all of it in the thin air of 6,300 feet. The practice pattern per week: 3-a-day, 3-a-day, 2-a-day, 3-a-day, 3-a-day, 2-a-day, day off.

In order to do these workouts, Phelps consumes 12,000 calories while training. Here's his breakfast: three fried egg sandwiches with cheese, lettuce, tomato, fried onions, and mayonnaise. That's followed by two cups of coffee, a five egg omelet, one bowl of maize porridge, three slices of French toast with powdered sugar, and three chocolate chip pancakes. Then he gets in the pool. I would just drown if I didn't explode first.

Discipline is required to do anything great. The Christian life demands everything of us. We constantly have to bring our A game if we're going to move forward. So let's consider God's tough love again and read

Hebrews 12:5-8

And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,

"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
6 because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son."

7 Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? 8 If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all.

What is the motivation for God's discipline?

The motivation for God's discipline

The writer of Hebrews encourages us that when we are disciplined by God, far from communicating to us that God hates us, God is communicating to us that he loves us and we are his children.

A young woman told me that when she was in high school her mother discovered drugs in her purse. Mom came to her and held up a bag and said, “What’s this?” The daughter said, “What do you think it is?” Mom said, “Well, it looks like pills.” She put them on the table, walked out of the room and never said another word to that young woman about what she discovered in her purse. The young woman said that from that moment on, she knew in her heart that her mother didn’t care about me at all.

Let’s read again

Hebrews 12:7-8

⁷ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ⁸ If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all.

The writer of Hebrews is simply underlining what every parent experiences in child raising. We care way more about our own children’s attitudes and behaviors and performance than we do about someone else’s kid. If someone else’s kid acts up, someone else’s kid does something embarrassing – they cheat on a test, they steal something. We may be annoyed or feel bad for her parents, but we won’t necessarily feel any responsibility towards that child.

So many folks think, “Well, I’m a child of God that means I can get away with murder because God loves me.” The writer of Hebrews says that it’s exactly the opposite. If you choose to become a child of God by putting your faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, to save you from your sins then you are signing up for the tough love of God. You are now his son or daughter and he cares what his sons and daughters act like and think like.

Over against many parents today, our Father in Heaven knows that the proof of love is discipline.

- Because I really love my children, I am honest with them. I don’t paint a dishonest picture about how they are doing. I speak lovingly, but truthfully.
- Because I love my children, I care enough to offer clear direction, even if it’s difficult or unpopular at the time.
- Because I love my children, I will help them to see the long term ripple-effects of their decisions. I teach them to “pay now and play later.”
- Because I really love my children, I provide loving discipline, but more than that I teach them to discipline themselves so the world won’t discipline them without love.

How does God discipline us?

The method of God's discipline

Hebrews 12:5-6

5 And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,

“My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,

6 because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

We need to understand that according to the Bible, discipline has a lot of edges to it. It involves correcting, instructing, rebuking and warning. In the broadest sense, discipline is training for a person so that they learn the fruit of self-control in some area of life. God disciplines us so that we will become disciplined people. One of the words for discipline in the Bible is “nurture”. In other words, discipline assists people to grow up. God's loving discipline is not driven by anger or punitiveness. He wants to help his children grow up well.

According to Hebrews 12, the reason why we resist disciplining our children and the reason why we resist being disciplined is that all discipline involves pain.

Hebrews 12:11a

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.

Discipline involves some level of discomfort, some deprivation, some shot across the bow that gets our attention. How does God do that? Sometimes God our Father disciplines us directly. He allows us to be caught or exposed when we're involved in something we ought not to be involved in.

Most often, God uses other people to discipline us. We desperately need caring, loving people in our lives who will love us enough to correct us when we get off track. I believe part of a truly loving marriage and part of a truly loving family is designed to bring discipline into each other's lives, to bring correction. I believe that a well-functioning small group and Christian friends can offer loving discipline to each other. Certainly, God has constructed the universe in such a way that we are disciplined by the moral laws set up to govern the universe.

There is a grain to the universe! When we run our hands or our lives across the grain of God's moral laws we will get splinters.

If we're unkind or untrustworthy, we're going to have lots of pain in our relationships. I need to immediately add this word of loving care for each of you who are listening to me today. All pain that we experience in life is not discipline from God. It's important to be able to discern, "Lord, are you trying to say something to me in this trial or grief or is this just part and parcel of living in a fallen world that is not functioning according to the plan of God?" I believe that God can work good out of anything in the lives of his children, but I don't believe that every difficult thing is God's discipline of his children.

If you're confused about you're going through, sit down with a wise, mature Christian and ask them to help you to figure out if this is the discipline of the Lord or is this just part and parcel of living in a world damaged by sin.

Last thing,

The purpose of discipline

Hebrews 12:9-10

Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰ They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness.

The writer here is contrasting the discipline that we receive from our earthly fathers and the discipline that we receive from our Heavenly Father. Listen, one of the reasons why it is very hard for parents these days to discipline our kids is because we were disciplined poorly by our own parents. Maybe the reason our parents disciplined us is because they were just mad at us. We annoyed them. Or they were frustrated with their lives and they took it out on us because we were smaller and weaker. Or maybe the way the disciplined was overly harsh or abusive or inconsistent. Sometimes we'd get punished for saying something or doing something and sometimes we wouldn't. It just depended on how our parents felt in the moment.

Our Heavenly Father is completely different in his discipline. He doesn't blow hot and cold. He doesn't say something is wrong today, but not tomorrow. If God disapproves of something, he always disapproves of it. No matter how long we've been doing that thing or having that attitude. No matter how much society has changed. No matter how many people say something is ok. God is consistent. He doesn't discipline out of annoyance. He doesn't discipline us because he's had a bad day. He doesn't discipline us because we're weaker or smaller. And he doesn't discipline us because we've embarrassed him somehow and he's just trying to save face.

There's one reason that our Father in Heaven disciplines us. Look at

Hebrews 12:10

They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness.

God brings tough love into our lives for our good. Unlike earthly parents who have limited vision and can't see everything ahead, God our Father is not just concerned about how we feel in the moment, this hour, this day or even this week or month or year. God our Father's tough love makes his children ready to share eternity in fellowship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit forever and ever.

Tough Love

Rich Nathan
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The Father Loves You
Hebrews 12:4-11

1. The Resistance to Discipline
2. The Necessity of Discipline
3. The Motivation of Discipline
4. The Method of Discipline
5. The Purpose of Discipline