

My Crazy Family

1. Conflict and Forgiveness

November 4-5, 2017

With holidays around the corner, many of us are going to be gathering with families, so it seems like a good time to look at what God says about living in a family. How many of you are part of a family? OK, then you know that family life can be rich --- and it can be crazy. Here's a picture of my family. They are a tremendous blessing; they are amazing. I love our family and I'm proud of them. I'd like to tell you that our family is always perfectly peaceful and joy-filled, but then I'd be lying in church, so I'd better not.

Every family is made up of imperfect people, so every family is dysfunctional in some way -- it's just a matter of degree. That's why family sitcoms are popular ---- because we can watch them and say, "At least my family is not as crazy as they are...."

But all the families in the Bible were well-adjusted and healthy, right? Wrong. All the families in the Bible were some degree of crazy. In the very first family - Adam and Eve's -- one of their sons murdered the other. Abraham gave his wife to another man and said she was his sister, David committed adultery and had his lover's husband killed. Even Jesus' family had its moments, like when his parents lost track of him and left town without him. But in spite of their craziness, God was at work in all these families. And they teach us important lessons on how God calls us to live in our family.

In this message series we're going to look at several biblical families and discover how following Jesus makes a difference in our families. We could call this series "Family life made slightly less crazy." Today we're going to learn about what do when you have conflict in your family. Now, maybe you don't have any conflict going on in your family right now -- I hope you don't. But you will at some point, and you'll need to know this.

We're going to learn from a guy named Joseph who had a lot of conflict with his brothers. If you have your Bible you can turn to Genesis 50. We know a lot about Joseph because the story of his life is the longest of anyone in the book of Genesis. Joseph's life is a story of sibling rivalry. He was one of 12 boys whose father was Jacob. He was the second youngest son, and he was clearly his father's favorite. Jacob made no effort to hide that he loved Joseph best. For example, Jacob gave Joseph a beautiful multi-colored robe. It made him stand out from everyone else. Every day Joseph wore this robe it advertised, "Dad gave this to me, not you -- everyone can see he loves me best." You can imagine how that went over with his 11 brothers.

And Joseph often acted like a spoiled brat. His brothers had to work while he didn't. His brothers felt that Joseph was an ego-tripping jerk. In Genesis 37 Joseph told his brothers, "Hey, let me tell you about this cool dream I had last night: you were all bowing down to me!" That went over like a pregnant pole vaulter with his brothers. In those days the older brother always had authority over younger brothers.

One day, Joseph's brothers had had enough. They were out taking care of the family's flocks when Jacob sent Joseph to find out what they were doing and to report back to him. When Joseph arrived, the brothers saw their chance to get rid of him. They were in the middle of nowhere with no witnesses. They thought about killing him, but then decided to throw him down a well instead. That way he was out of their hands and out of their hair. Fate would determine whether he died or not. Then they went back and lied to their father, saying wild animals killed Joseph.

Eventually, Joseph got rescued -- by slave traders. They sold him as a slave to a high official in Egypt. Joseph served well in his home, but then got framed when he refused the advances of the man's wife. He spent years in jail. At one point an inmate he helped to get released promised to speak up for him, but when the inmate got out he forgot all about Joseph and let him stay in jail. So... he was a slave in a foreign country, then he was falsely accused and sat for years in a prison. All of this is because of what his brothers did to him.

Finally, through a chain reaction of events, Joseph gets called before the Pharaoh to interpret a dream. God gives him the power to interpret it accurately, and Pharaoh sets Joseph free. Eventually, he rises to the second-highest position in the land, in charge of the nation's grain supply while the rest of the region was in famine. And then his brothers resurface. Clearly, Joseph and his brothers didn't know how to resolve conflict. And it caused pain. If you've had unresolved conflict in your family, you know that it is no fun. When we don't know how to resolve conflict:

- it strains and breaks our relationships with family members.
- it causes emotional and even physical pain
- it damages our relationship with God.

If we want to live in harmony with our families, we need to learn to resolve conflict. Here are a few basics.

To Reduce Conflict with your family:

1. Determine that you will not fight.

When you sense that there is tension between yourself and someone, the first thing to do is to recommit yourself that you will not fight. It's hard to have a conflict with someone who won't fight.

Last year at an international Mixed Martial Arts tournament in Shanghai, the referee ended a match and disqualified both fighters because they were just going through the motions. <https://globalvoices.org/2016/03/16/all-holds-barred-in-cage-fight-between-two-kazakhs/> It turns out that the fighter from Kazakhstan discovered his opponent was also a Kazakh who just happened to live in China. So they traded a few light punches and half-hearted leg kicks, but when the ref saw they weren't going to fight, he ended the match and disqualified them both. One of the fighters said afterwards: *"When I entered the ring and the fight started, I felt immediately like [he] was avoiding hitting me, I understood that he didn't want to fight with me, and I couldn't raise my hand against another Kazakh either."* If an MMA fighter can determine not to fight, we can too! We can tell ourselves, "I won't raise my hand, or my voice, against another family member."

How much conflict could be avoided if you just decided you weren't going to fight, even if the other person wants us to? I loved the story of a couple who were celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. Someone asked the wife "What is the secret to being married for so long?" She said, "Well, when we got married I made a list of 10 things I wouldn't yell at my husband about. And over the years, whenever he did something that aggravated me, I'd say 'It's a good thing that's on the list...' and move on." "Wow," the person said, "can I see what's on your list?" The wife replied, "I don't remember - just whatever needs to be on there." What's on your list?

Refusing to fight isn't easy. It means you will have to ignore some things they are saying or doing that aren't right. Maybe you could argue. But you don't have to. So many of our conflicts could be avoided if we just don't respond to what someone says or does --- if we just ignore it ---- let it go. Much of the time the issue is not that important. A high percentage of the time, we will forget about the issue in a couple of hours... unless we start a fight over it. It takes a conscious choice to hold our tongue, to not react when we could. So, let's pause to make a resolution right now that you will not fight with a family member. Let's pause right now and ask God to make that true in us. *[Prayer]*

But sometimes we can't ignore what is going on. Sometimes there is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. When the issue can't be ignored, you have to engage it. But that doesn't mean you need to go to war.

2. As needed: Attack the issue, not the person

When we are in a conflict, our goal can't be to win it, it is to resolve it. To do that, we need to attack the issue and not the person. Maybe Joseph's brothers couldn't keep ignoring the way he was favored by Jacob. But they didn't have to throw him down a well. What if Joseph and his brothers had sat down and dealt honestly with the fact that Joseph was the favorite? Isn't that healthier than attempted murder? When you are in a conflict with a member of your family, you need to define the problem so that you can both work on it together. You might want to say, "The problem is that you're a jerk!" That's not defining the problem, that's called attacking the person. To attack the problem means to

define what's happening in a way that you can both work to find a solution. To do that:

1. Make "I" statements

As soon as we define the issue by saying, "You always/ you never..." it makes the other person feel the need to defend themselves, and then the battle's on. When you use "you" statements, the other person builds a wall to protect themselves, and then you're on opposite sides. If I define the problem in terms of how it impacts me, we can work on it together. For example, Joseph's brothers could have said, "You're so stuck up, wearing that robe around like you're all that." That's a "you" statement that leads to conflict. They could have made an "I" statement, "When I see you in that special robe it reminds me that Dad loves you best, and that hurts." Then Joseph doesn't have to defend himself, he can lean in.

Stick to the issue

In the heat of battle, we look for any chink in the other person's armor. So we will bring up anything we can think of that shows they are wrong. Like, "Oh yeah? Well. You forgot my birthday, and you ate the last piece of pizza last night, and 3 years ago you dropped my iPhone!" If you're going to solve a conflict, you need to stick to the issue. Otherwise the conflict just escalates. Most of our conflicts can be resolved when we start with a "no-fight" attitude and attack the issue and not the person. Some might require a godly counselor though, so don't hesitate to seek that.

3. Above all: Choose to Forgive

Joseph had the perfect opportunity to become a bitter man. The ingredients were there: Hurt + Time=Bitterness. Can you imagine being sold as a slave and thinking, "My brothers did this to me." Or sitting in a jail as the years go by thinking, "My brothers actually thought about killing me. And it is because of them that I am wasting my life in this jail." He could have come out of prison an angry, resentful, bitter man. No one would have been surprised after what had happened to him. But he didn't cave into bitterness, and that saved him.

If he had allowed bitterness to consume him, he would not have been able to hear from God and to interpret those dreams. If he had not interpreted those dreams, he would never have gotten out of prison or become the powerful leader he became. And if he had caved in to bitterness, the final meeting with his brothers would have ended much differently.

After Joseph had become a powerful leader in Egypt, his brothers showed up again. There was a famine in Canaan and they were in danger of starving. So they came to Egypt to ask for grain, and Joseph was in charge of the grain. Just as the brothers realized they were at Joseph's mercy, their father died.

Genesis 50:15-21 ¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" ¹⁶ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: ¹⁷ 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept. ¹⁸ His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

What an emotionally traumatic moment for Joseph. After years of injustice and pain because of what his brothers did, they show up asking for forgiveness. They tell him, "We are your slaves" -- isn't that what every wounded person wants to hear from the one who hurt them? Bitterness makes us want to see them pay. But Joseph was not consumed with bitterness, so Joseph was able to forgive them.

¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. ²¹ So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

After all that had happened, Joseph didn't take revenge. And that is the essence of forgiveness.

Forgiveness = releasing the right to get even

Forgiveness is not forgetting what someone did to you. Joseph would never forget. Forgiveness is not pretending that it didn't hurt you. You know it did. Forgiveness is not the same as restoring the relationship. That is called reconciling, and that is wonderful if it happens, but that is not the same thing as forgiving. You might forgive someone who you are not safe to be around. You might forgive someone who is dead. Forgiveness is choosing to release the right to get even. It is to let the scales be uneven and not ask for justice. Joseph had the right and the authority to lock those brothers up in the same jail that he was in. It would have been justice. But Joseph chose to forgive. It wasn't fair. Those brothers didn't get what they deserved. They were forgiven.

Are there members of your family who hurt you? If so, remember that refusing to forgive can allow bitterness to grow. That can poison your body and your relationship with God. It can steal your joy and limit your love. We only hurt ourselves when we refuse to forgive. You've heard the old phrase that to hold a grudge is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. Not smart. While you lie awake at night with your stomach churning thinking about it, the other person is sleeping soundly.

The answer is forgiveness. Here is how.

> **Act first.** Don't wait for the person to ask forgiveness - you might be waiting forever and you can't afford that. As soon as you are aware that you are resentful from a hurt, choose to forgive.

> **Remember God forgives you.** Aren't you glad that the Lord does not treat us as our sins deserve? In the Lord's prayer Jesus teaches us to pray "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." When we don't forgive others, we are saying "God please show mercy on me, but bring justice on that person who sinned against me." **Colossians 3:13** *Forgive as the Lord forgave you.* When we are in touch with how deeply we need God's mercy, it is easier to consider showing mercy to the person who wronged us. Let God do the judging. That's what Joseph did. **V. 19** *"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?"* God can take care of the justice side of things a lot better than us.

> **Watch for how God will use the experience (v. 20)** ²⁰ *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.* Because Joseph's brothers threw him in a well he ended up in Egypt. And because he was in Egypt, God was able to reveal the Pharaoh's dream to him and Joseph could lead the nation to prepare for the famine. Thousands were saved from starvation. God will use your hurt, too. When you forgive, it releases God's blessing over your life and frees him to work in surprising ways.

> **Bless them (v. 21)** ²¹ *So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.* You know that you have forgiven when you can do something good for the other person. Perhaps pray for that person. Perhaps buy a gift, do a favor -- you name it. Even when you cannot reduce the amount of conflict, forgiveness will reduce its impact on you.

Every family will have some level of conflict, because we are imperfect human beings. But God can help us to resolve it, and shows us the way to forgive.