

FAMILY MATTERS, MATTER

Two Bad Parents & Two Bad Brothers: Part 3

Written By
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Prior to moving to northern Virginia from California, my sister, Julie, a successful officer for a large title company, talked me, a busy pastor and sheriff chaplain, into becoming a notary so I could close her loans. At that point, the real estate market in California was booming, so I thought it a great decision to help pay for Amanda to attend college. So, I took and passed the state’s notary test and quickly started my traveling notary business. Believe me, not only did the evening and weekend job pay well, it afforded me numerous witnessing and pastoral opportunities, plus it gave me powerful life illustrations I will never forget.

One family debacle topped them all.

Sitting at a large wooden conference table at the title company with my sister, we waited for two brothers and two sisters to show up and sign papers on a piece of property their father left to them. The oldest brother, a farmer, came in toting a large, weathered leather satchel full of papers of some sort. The other siblings simply came in and sat down.

Within a few minutes it became quite apparent no one would be signing documents that day. One sister kindly asked her oldest brother, “Larry (not his real name, of course), how did dad happen to change his will at the last and leave you all of his properties, along with all of the expensive farm equipment?” He angrily defended himself since he had lived on the highly valued property taking care of his father.

Larry’s little sister piped up, “What happened to all of dad’s cash? What have you done with it?” Again, Larry exploded all over her for questioning his integrity and financial activity.

Eventually, his little brother, who lived in the Sierra foothills in a mobile home, asked, “Larry, how could you, as the executor of dad’s will, simply cut all of us out of his investments? Dad left that money to all of us as his children, not just to you. Look at me,

you know how I live. You know what I don't have. You know I'm on disability. How can you just sit there smugly and take all of dad's money?"

With that, Larry slammed the leather satchel on the table, violently flipped it open, and started rifling through various papers as he said, "I don't know what the problem is with all of you. We've been fighting over dad's holdings for years and these are all the legal documents which support what I've done. Personally, I'm tired of all of the attorney fees, and I'm sick and tired of all of you questioning how dad changed things at the end of his life."

Eventually, they all stormed out of the room, but I couldn't help but see the sadness and hurt in the faces of the two sisters and the younger brother. You see, their father, a simple, hard-working farmer, purchased a lot of farm land in his day and over the course of many years it became so valuable he sold it by the square foot, making him a millionaire who still lived like a simple, salt-of-the-earth man. However, as his mind began to fade in his later years and his home became his hospital, the oldest brother managed to get him to change the will to his sole advantage.

In light of this story, let me ask you a personal question: How do you forgive a brother like Larry? Can you? How do you make peace with a brother who has ripped you off and seemed to enjoy it? Let's flip the scenario around. Suppose you are Larry who finally wakes up to the pain and woe you've caused your siblings. What do you do? Can you build a bridge back to your siblings? How do you go about it? And if you do, will things ever be the same? Will they forgive you?

The story of this fighting family in California merely mirrors the warfare which occurred between two brothers in the Old Testament, Jacob and Esau. Like Larry, Jacob basically stole all the wealth of the family from his brother, using all kinds of devious means, and then when his brother found out and wanted to literally kill him, Jacob's mother arranged for him to flee to her brother Laban's home in Haran, a city located north of what is now Damascus (Genesis 27:43). Some twenty tough years later, years God used to convict, chisel, and mature Jacob, God commanded the former bad brother to return to the Promised Land (Genesis 31:3). Genesis chapters 32 through 33 detail his journey southward, and they also give us a high definition picture of what forgiveness looks like from the perspective of a perpetrator (Jacob) and a victim (Esau . . . well, he was a victim to a degree).

It's a picture we can all learn from, for we all have family situations with head south, at times, ones calling us now to strive for peace and unity by means of the art of forgiveness. Should you be a Jacob or an Esau this day, should your family be experiencing fracturing based upon sinful behavior of some of its members, I think this ancient clip will be the balm to heal the division once and for all.

Our journey really begins with a simple, yet probing question:

What Does Forgiveness Look Like In A Fractured Family? (Genesis 32-33)

Please. Don't forget the backstory of Jacob's life. As I said, he spent twenty years in Haran, and they were not all pleasant. He served Laban, his uncle, for seven years for the privilege of marrying the love of his life, Rachel, his beautiful cousin (Genesis 29:18). Laban deceived him into marrying and consummating the marriage with his oldest

daughter, Leah, the plainer, homely-looking cousin (Genesis 29:21-25). Don't tell me what goes around doesn't eventually come around. It's a timeless principle woven throughout the Word of God (Job 4:8; Galatians 6:7). If you live deceptively, expect deception to waylay you in the future. It's just God's way of showing you the ugly, destructive nature of your sinister activity. Jacob certainly learned the hard way not to be a cunning, conniving man. For seven more years he served his devious uncle in order to marry Rachel (Genesis 29:30). Twenty years, two wives, two maidservant "wives" (Bilhah . . . Rachel's maid, and Zilpah . . . Leah's maid), and thirteen children later, along with a vast array of hired hands and flocks and livestock, Jacob's sinful bent had been straightened in God's school of discipline, thus preparing him to head home and encounter his estranged brother.

Can you identify? If you are the Jacob-type, perhaps you are smack dab in the middle of your Haran experience right now. Your life is tough, really falling apart. You've moved and your troubles have moved with you. Relationships, personally and professionally, around you are a wreck, despite your best efforts to fix them, and even your own children don't get along with you or each other. You have certainly had plenty of sleepless nights staring at the ceiling wondering, "What in the world is going on? Why is everything so difficult and demanding?" Answer: Could it be God is attempting to shape and hone your inner man/woman? Could it be God is attempting to chisel your soul with some of the medicine you dealt out to other family members some time ago? Could it be God is merely preparing the ground in your life for that time when He sovereignly arranges for you to go back home to set things straight? I think there is a good chance this is true.

Jacob understood this divine drill. By analyzing these two powerful, practical passages which display God's drill, we can glean some life-giving, peace-making principles which can help facilitate familial health where there currently is disease. And as it always is with dealing with sin and sinners, don't expect the whole process to be neat and tidy. No, expect it to be a little messy as sinners seek to find their way to restoration by means of forgiveness. Expect also to unearth helpful and instructive principles about the process of forgiveness between two brothers with deep, divisive issues, coupled with a whole lot of heavy, hurtful baggage from skirmishes fought over the years.

Resting our eyes on verse 1 of chapter 32, we run into our first principle:

Take The First Step (Genesis 32:1a)

The Hebrew text is highly emphatic here. It grammatically accomplishes this by wedding the coordinating conjunction, *waw*, with the noun, Jacob (הַיָּאֵבֶן לְדָוִד) and placing it first in the sentence instead of a verb. God simply underscores the fact that Jacob did the hard thing.

¹ Now as Jacob went on his way, the angels of God met him.

He left the comfort of his life and headed toward home, knowing full-well he'd probably run into his estranged, formerly enraged brother. He could have manufactured a thousand reasons to stay in Haran:

- ✓ My brother will kill me the minute he lays eyes on me.
- ✓ I absolutely hate confrontation, so it's better just to stay put.
- ✓ My brother could potentially wipe out my entire family.
- ✓ There is no way to undo what I've done, so it's wiser just to let it be.
- ✓ All of my business contacts and investments are here in the Haran region, so why would I, at this pivotal time of my life, uproot and move back home where life can and probably will be quite unpredictable.

We have to admire Jacob because he didn't manufacture one lame or well-crafted excuse. God told him to go and he eventually went.

What about you? Will you go? Are you making excuses why you haven't gone?

- ✓ I just can't handle a potentially explosive situation one more time.
- ✓ I don't think they will ever forgive me for what I did to them.
- ✓ I've tried to reach out to them in little ways and it just went nowhere, so why would I want to actually show up and ask for some serious face-time?

Funny how we quickly rationalize reasons for not doing the right thing.

If you're a follower of Christ, He's quite clear concerning the course of action you need to take. Remember His words in His Sermon on the Mount?

²¹ You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.'²² "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell (Matthew 5).

Gulp. Wow, what a bone-rattling, mind-numbing statement.

The Pharisees prided themselves in obeying the Law of Moses. They smugly felt they, of all people, had never actually murdered anyone; therefore, they were keepers of God's commandment to steer clear of taking someone out (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). Jesus, conversely, educated them regarding how God's judgment really works. He says that rude, abusive, and angry talk is equivalent to murder and are, therefore, capital crimes. I think many of the self-righteous, upset, and hateful speakers in our culture are clueless to how God will judge them. If they feared Him (Proverbs 1:1-7), they would radically change how they talk, report, and write and how angry they are over various cultural and political issues. Don't ever forget, *we tend to loosen what God tightens and tighten what He loosens*. You might need to read that one more time so it sinks into the rich soil of your soul.

With verse 23, Jesus turns and gives us a flash of practical insight of what He just said:

²³ Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering (Matthew 5).

Commenting on these verses, David Turner writes in the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew,

Jesus now speaks of the consequences of anger and abusive speech by posing a concrete situation in which personal reconciliation takes precedence over religious duty. Significantly, the situation here does not pertain to one's own anger but to the anger or grudge of another. Disciples are thus not only to rein in their own anger but also to take steps to reconcile with others who are angry at them. It is not a question of arguing about who offended whom but of taking responsibility and initiating reconciliation. Jesus's concern for harmonious relations within the community of disciples is underlined in Matt. 18:6, 10, 12–17, 21–35. Here reconciliation with a fellow disciple must be addressed before one offers a sacrifice in the temple. Jesus's stress on the priority of reconciliation and justice over sacrificial worship is in keeping with such biblical texts as 1 Sam. 15:22; Isa. 1:10–18; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6–8. As in the model prayer (Matt. 6:12, 14–15; cf. 18:15–17), divine forgiveness is linked with human forgiveness.¹

Great insights, wouldn't you agree?

Whether our real brother has wronged us, or we have wronged him, whether the brother in question is a Christian brother, Jesus instructs us to do what is necessary to secure reconciliation. He also warns us to be careful not to attempt to cover our lack of integrity with ceremony. This is what the Pharisees did so well. Pragmatically, he is saying if you are in worship and are, say, about to open your Bible to listen to another great, moving, and challenging sermon full of tasty meat and you remember a fractured relationship you either caused or was brought your way, then you must stop and take quick, definitive action to create peace. Strange how I don't see anyone making an exit for the proverbial door. I guess there are no fouled-up families among us.

Some two thousand years before Jesus, the God-man, taught on this grassy, sunny hillside on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jacob, the godly man, grew to understand that God calls us to sensitivity in all of our relationships, seeking to root out offenses which create hurt or provide soil for a root of bitterness to germinate. Realizing this timeless truth, Jacob's sandals led him south . . . toward home and his bothered brother.

Once more, I gently ask you, What are you going to do? Will you take the first step toward reconciliation, even though it might be the hardest step? Jacob did it and, as we shall see, God had not only been working in his hard heart, He had worked overtime in the heart of a hunter, Esau. I'm sure the same will prove to be true in your sordid, twisted situation.

In addition to this truth, we discover another one in the last part of verse 1 through verse 2.

¹ David L. Turner, *Matthew, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 169.

operations, coupled with Jacob's camp. Together they formed one group on God's mission. Please take note of this historical narrative because it merely shows you how God works when we work on a tough, trying situation. Although we can't see them in the spiritual sphere, His angels show up to defend us as we journey home to seek to bring peace where there has been only hardness and hostility. Burke, Alexandria, and Springfield are, therefore, merely Gentile names for the Hebrew, Mahanaim. Don't ever forget this for it will put wind in your sails and strength in your heart as you head out to encounter your brother.

A third principle logically flows from the second.

Send A Peace Team (Genesis 32:3-5)

In our vernacular we typically call this *greasing the skids*. Etymologically, this phrase can be traced back to how lumberjacks in the early 1900s used tallow on the wooden paths to make moving massive logs easier. It was also used in shipbuilding to describe how tallow was used on skids to make insertion of large boats into the water simpler. One quote from May 31, 1911 states it took 23 tons of tallow and soft soap to grease the skids so the Titanic could move from the dry dock to the waiting water.³ Applied to messed up, tweaked relationships it means to do something of a positive sort to make a given confrontation with peace in mind less confrontational.

Just what did Jacob do? Read on and you'll see.

³ Then Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. ⁴ He also commanded them saying, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: 'Thus says your servant Jacob, "I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now; ⁵ I have oxen and donkeys and flocks and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight."

Did you get that? Jacob sent multiple messengers some ninety miles through barren, trackless, hot terrain to get to his brother with a positive message before he ever showed up. You might say he was chicken, but I say he was creative. Instead of him just showing up unannounced on Esau's doorstep with ample people and possessions, he chose to let his brother know he was, in fact, coming after all these years. This way, his brother had time to anticipate the arrival and chart a course of action. This way, his brother could give ample time to think about his feelings and determine if he really still harbored animosity toward the brother who was coming his way. This way, the chance for peace was given a chance for success.

And make sure you don't miss how Jacob told his servants to speak to his older brother, Esau. He specifically commanded them to call him "my lord," and to refer to

2 Ch 31:2; pl. (opp. מְבָרָרִים = fortresses) Nu 13:19. **2.** camp of armed host Jos 6:11⁰, 14 (JE), 1 S 4:3, 5, 6⁰, 7; 17:53; 2 K 7:16 etc. **3.** a. those who encamp Nu 10:5, 6; 1 Ch 11:5 ψ 27:3 (all c. vb. חָנָה), cf. (prob.) Is 37:36 = 2 K 19:35, etc. b. company, body of people; people and beasts Gn 32:8, 9⁰, 11; 33:8, funeral company of Jacob Gn 50:9; of Isr. on march Ex 14:19, 20 cf. Nu 10:5, 6. c. army, host Jos 8:13; 10:5; 11:4 Ju 4:15, 16⁰ 7:1, 8; 8:10⁰, 11⁰ 12 1 S 17:1, 46 2 K 3:9 even while in the thick of the fight; 1 K 22:34 = 2 Ch 18:33 etc.²

³ <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/231468/what-is-the-origin-of-the-phrase-grease-the-skids>.

Jacob as Esau's "servant." Granted, he did, in fact, hold title to the family birthright and the coveted prophetic family blessings, which means he didn't have to speak like this. The fact he did shows, I think, a humility in his spirit. At this point in his life he had learned the relationship with his brother was infinitely more important than some temporary earthly moniker. Don't you now they had their fair share of derogatory names for each other as they grew up, especially after all they went through? Don't you know that Esau had muttered those names in madness for years every time he thought about how Jacob had duped their dad and him? But now things are different in the heart of Jacob and the words show the radical, spiritual change. Now he who sought to be over his brother fights for the bottom, not the top of their relationship because tough times have sandblasted his prideful spirit, resulting in making him a meek, humble, caring man.

Who can't learn from this model? Think about the situation the Spirit has His holy finger on right now in your life. You know what I'm talking about. You know who I'm talking about. You probably even know the year when the relationship blew up and where you were with great specificity. Now, as you attempt, by God's enabling and empowerment, to rectify the wrongs you did in the name of pride, power, money and who knows what else, think of how you can grease those skids with your brother, sister, mother, or father, child, grandchild, grandfather, grandmother, cousin, uncle, or aunt. Yes, what would tallow look like? (Tallow being a slippery substance formed from beef or mutton fat . . . just in case you didn't know. If you've fried meat and wound up with a bunch of grease which turned white afterward, then you know what tallow is). Check the boxes which apply and/or create your own:

- Send a brother or sister over to the person in questions house to let them know you desire to travel in their direction for a long-overdue conversation.
- Shoot an e-mail to your offended family member letting them know you know it is time to this whole situation how and to come to some sort of a conclusion.
- Get ahold of the offended family member on Facebook and let them know that too much wicked water has gone under the bridge, and that you'd like to meet up with them to talk this whole sad situation out.

These scenarios are always way more complex than we can imagine, and the perps and the victims can be a wide array of people, from ex-husbands to an adoptive parent you've had a relationship with over the last several years. I don't know what your situation is, but you do, and I'm convinced that God will show you how to grease the skids if you will but ask Him. So what are you waiting on? Time is, as they say down south, a wastin'.

Several years ago a young boy took a shot at his grandmother's pet duck with his new slingshot and got a direct and deadly hit. Thinking nobody saw the unbelievable and lucky shot, he quickly buried the (lame) duck, and then went about his business as if nothing had happened.

Later, the boy found out that his sister had seen it all. And she now had the leverage of his secret and used it. Whenever it was the sister's turn to wash the dishes, take out the garbage, or wash the car, she, like a Jacob, would whisper in his ear, "Remember the duck." With that the little boy would fold like a lawn chair and do whatever his sister should have done.

One day, however, he couldn't take it anymore. Mustering a great deal of courage, he went privately to his grandmother and with great fear, confessed what he had done. To his surprise, she hugged him and thanked him. She said, "I was standing at the kitchen sink and saw the whole thing. I forgave you then. I was just wondering when you were going to get tired of your sister's blackmail and come to me." After that he, like anyone else, was faced with how to build a relationship back with his sister.⁴ And she was faced with what type of sister she really wanted to be.

I find it interesting how family fractures can start, don't you? A duck getting nailed with a rock from a slingshot can escalate to bigger and uglier things if not kept in check, resulting in a brother and sister champing at the bit to get away from or to get even with each other when they are older. That division can also start with little things like arguing over whether the correct idiom is champing at the bit or chomping at the bit.⁵ The so-called brighter brother can easily put down a slower brother for his uneducated ways, resulting in a friction which can turn into a fire if not dealt with early on.

I'd say, then, it's time to come clean by seeking, you guessed it, forgiveness. Go ahead. Take that all-important first step.

⁴ Steve Brown, *Three Free Sins* (New York: Howard Books, 2012), 110.