

FAMILY MATTERS, MATTER

Two Bad Parents & Two Bad Brothers: Part 2

Written By
Martin A. Baker
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The counseling training I received from doctors Minrith and Meir in grad school prepared me to help dysfunctional people and families head toward mental and spiritual health and wholeness, if they chose to listen to the counsel. Please, place heavy emphasis on the word “if.” As a new pastor in 1989, one couple in particular demonstrated the power of the conditional sentence.

The lady in question waltzed into my office in her business suit, with her somewhat subdued husband walking silently behind her. She looked and sounded very professional, he, on the other hand, seemed somewhat disheveled and inarticulate. Without wasting time on small talk, she reached in her purse, whipped out a multi-sheet document, and tossed it on my desk.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Go ahead,” she confidently said, “Open it. It lists all the reasons why I want to divorce him.”

As I read through all the numbered items, I couldn’t believe the nature of the marriage ending infractions:

- He doesn’t put his cowboy boots away when he pulls them off next to the bed.
- He leaves business papers stacked on the desk in the home office.
- He doesn’t stay on top of the leaves in the fall, letting them pile up.

I’ll stop there because she gave me pages (plural) of his marital atrocities. Personally, none of these accusations warranted divorce, but I could not convince her. She heard my advice on how they should both work toward a place of peace and tranquility in their relationship, but she let me know straight away he was husband number five in line of

men who just didn't treat her right. The threat couldn't be missed: If he did shape up, she'd ship him out just like the others.

Unaddressed dysfunction is a destructive thing to a marriage and family isn't it? If anyone learned the premise of this timeless truth it was Isaac and Rebekah and their two grown sons, Jacob and Esau. Unlike the lady I just mentioned, who had major control issues, their family issue circled around the sin of favoritism. Even though God prophetically stated that the younger of the two twins, Jacob, would rule and reign over the older one, Esau, the parents sided with their favorite son in a mis-guided quest to make sure God wound up blessing them big-time. So, Isaac went against God's word and favored Esau, while Rebekah favored Jacob.

And the two sons didn't help the dysfunctional situation either. Esau, in a moment of extreme hunger when he returned from a hunting expedition, shockingly sold his birthright as the firstborn to his brother for basically a bowl of soup. Coupled with his penchant for marrying Canaanite women outside of God's directive (Genesis 26:34), the soup episode showed he was a man who lived for the moment and for his desires, not the desires of God. Jacob, on the other hand, had his own personal issues. Based on his mother's cunning, deceptive plan which lacked faith while also challenging the providence of God, he dressed up like his brother, took his father his favorite meal, and then received the patriarchal prophetic blessing from God . . . as if he was the firstborn (Genesis 27:1-29). Don't tell me favoritism isn't that big of a deal in a family. It's a very big deal as we've seen and as we shall see as we continue to develop the main point embedded in the inspired narrative:

What Are The Dangers Of Favoring One Child Over Another (Genesis 27)

We've already encountered the first danger:

Danger #1: Deception (Genesis 27:9-29)

The point should be well-taken. When you start favoring one child over the other, for whatever the reasons, you can wind up behaving in a way you would never dream of prior. I'm sure ol' Rebekah just excitedly wanted Jacob to experience the fullness of God's prophesied blessing; however, she, being a lover of control, would not step back and let God work His will out. She stepped into help Him by means of lying and deception, while Isaac willfully went against God's prophetic word by promising to give Esau the patriarchal blessing. Sad, isn't it? Sad how we let our sinful carnality get in the way of what God desires to do. With this first point in mind, I need to ask you once more, "Are you guilty of favoring one child over the other?" Don't think for a minute it won't have negative repercussions both now and later.

A second danger arises from the next narrative panel . . .

Danger #2: Disillusion (Genesis 27:30-36)

Come with me as we read the text while making some pertinent, practical observations:

³⁰ Now it came about, as soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, and Jacob had hardly gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, that Esau his brother came in from his hunting.

The Hebrew emphasizes how close Jacob came to being found out. It reads:

וַיְהִי אַךְ יֵצֵא יַעֲקֹב מֵאֵת פְּנֵי יִצְחָק

The adverb אַךְ ('ak) emphatically underscores how Jacob had no sooner left the room with the coveted blessing than his brother came walking in with his father's favorite wild game dish. We'll let the text develop the sad story:

³¹ Then he also made savory food, and brought it to his father; and he said to his father, "Let my father arise and eat of his son's game, that you may bless me."

Can't you just see the hulk of a hunter standing there with a small bowl of food in his massive, muscular, weather beaten hands? Can't you just see the big, broad smile on his face when he anticipated getting one over on Jacob, finally? He didn't anticipate his father's response:

³² Isaac his father said to him, "Who are you?"

In Hebrew Isaac's statement lacks the verb to create emphasis (This is called ellipsis), מִי־אַתָּה. His words drip with absolute shock.

Somewhat stunned, Esau responds:

And he said, "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau."

He also left out the verb in order to emphatically state his position in the family (אֲנִי בְנֶךָ בְּכֹר). Translated into our vernacular Esau said, "Come on dad, it's me, Esau." You know he must have immediately thought something was up when he had to make this statement to his blind father.

At that precise moment, Isaac realized he had been had:

³³ Then Isaac trembled violently, and said, "Who was he then that hunted game and brought *it* to me, so that I ate of all *of it* before you came, and blessed him? Yes, and he shall be blessed."

The root "to tremble" is lexically used in some passages to denote an earthquake (Exodus 19:18). This root appears two times toward the beginning of this opening sentence to underscore how violently Isaac started to shake from his head to his toes. Why did he violently shake? He realized at that precise moment that God had providentially rebuffed him and had fulfilled His will despite his carnally driven favoritism. God does have a way of arresting our attention so we can see our sin and need to move toward and not away from Him. Don't expect Him to do any less in your bid to favor one child over the other.

All of your children are dear to Him, regardless of their strengths and weaknesses, and He will eventually stop you dead in your tracks so you can catch a glimpse of what He desires to accomplish in their lives, despite your uber control.

Esau had a flash of unwanted insight too:

³⁴ When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, “Bless me, *even* me also, O my father!”

What a scene from a grown man over forty (Genesis 26:34). Could it be a lifetime of being outwitted by his younger twin finally caught up with him? Emotional turmoil is a by-product, from what we know of modern psychological studies, of undue preferential treatment of one child over the other. Hence, Esau’s sobs are not completely unfounded. Makes you wonder, doesn’t it, what pent up emotions one of your children may have because you constantly compliment a brother or sister while never missing an opportunity to showcase their inherent weaknesses. Perhaps it is time for a heart to heart talk, don’t you think?

Isaac knew full-well what had just happened:

³⁵ And he said, “Your brother came deceitfully and has taken away your blessing.”

I find this conclusion most interesting. Isaac should have said, “I must have given the patriarchal prophetic blessing to Jacob as God had foretold at your birth, so, Esau, it’s time to grow up and trust in God’s leadership . . . even in this sordid situation.” He didn’t say that, however. By calling the blessing, “your blessing,” Isaac showed he still clung to the favored status of this son despite God’s word. How tenaciously do we hold to what we want as opposed to what God wants. It is hard to turn your child or children completely over to Him, asking Him to fulfill His will with your cooperation, when we have our own prideful, personal issues.

Esau, a middle-aged married man, knew exactly what had occurred:

³⁶ Then he said, “Is he not rightly named Jacob, for he has supplanted me these two times? He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing.” And he said, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?”

Esau employs a play on word in Hebrew to illustrate he now knows why his parents named his younger twin brother Jacob:

וַיֹּאמֶר הַכִּי קָרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב וַיַּעֲקֹבֵנִי

The noun Jacob (עַקֵּב ‘āqab) is, in his mind, rightly built on the verb supplanter or over-reacher (עָקַב ‘āqēb). “Thanks, Dad, for giving this name to Jacob for it fits him to a tee.” Esau correctly connects the dots of the behavior of his brother to the meaning of his name, but he didn’t, however, recount the loss of his birthright correctly. You will remember he

“sold” it to his brother, Jacob, over a bowl of soup. He, who lived for his stomach and for meeting his physical needs first and foremost above spiritual needs, hid his sinful choice by blaming his brother. His statement should cause all unfavored children to ask, “Am I permitting the behavior of my favored sibling to cause me to not see the real me, even though they may be doing things wrong because mom or dad let them get away with most everything?”

Sizing up Esau you can't help but sense his utter, 1,000 yard stare disillusionment. He is odd man out when it comes to blessing, either from his father or from God. His request, then, is most pitiful:

And he said, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?”

Favor one child over another long enough and eventually this is the termination point. It's a train station called disillusionment or hopelessness. Eventually, the unfavored child feels utterly betrayed and unappreciated. You know how this works, don't you?

- Dad, why do you always go to Johnny's Lacrosse games, but you can't ever seem to find the time to see my part in the play?
- Mom, you've been play \$450.00 a month for Larry to be on that traveling basketball team, but you don't ever seem to have a dime to support what I'm interested in. What gives?
- Dad, why do you and Stacey always go off and do special things, but you and I don't ever seem to hook up with things I'm interested in?
- Mom, why are you always praising and bragging about Dominique, and all you ever do is point out my weaknesses and mess-ups?
- Dad, why does Jennifer always get all the new clothes from Forever 21, while I have to wear the hand-me-downs from older cousins?

Ah, now you get the picture. See how a lifetime of this kind of parenting can develop a child into a teen or an adult with low self-esteem, depression, and a feeling of disillusionment that good things in life will ever come their way? Sure, each child is different, and parents will typically gravitate toward one wired like they are. That's natural. Sure, it is impossible to be completely equitable in this world, especially when some siblings are older and need different things from parents than younger ones might.

What is not natural is covertly and/or overtly perpetually preferring one child over the other, when both are special creations of God and in need of your love, attention, and sacrifice. Sure, God had prophesied that His blessing would rest on Jacob, not Esau, and that should have meant that Isaac and Rebekah worked with, not against, each other to make sure each son felt loved and cared for as equally as possible. Because they didn't do this, because they chose sides, they wound up with an adult son with several train cars of disillusionment.

So, parents take instruction from this messed up family. Work creatively together to make sure each of your children, no matter how they are wired, gifted, or skilled they are, know you both love and care for them no matter what. Let them know you will be right there in their corner, cheering for them and looking for God to work wondrously in their lives.

Moving from this sobbing section of the historical story, we bump into the third danger of favoritism in verses 37 through 40.

Danger #3: Divergence (Genesis 27:37-40)

What do I mean by this? I mean to state that things may not turn out as you have planned for your favored son or daughter based on how they respond to God's leadership. Read on and you'll see what I mean:

³⁷ But Isaac replied to Esau, "Behold, I have made him your master, and all his relatives I have given to him as servants; and with grain and new wine I have sustained him. Now as for you then, what can I do, my son?"

Sober words. Isaac realized God's providence had completely overruled his desire to give the prophetic patriarchal blessing to Esau, his favored son. And because he understood what just occurred, there was no way he could or would undo it. The positive blessing on Jacob had been given and it could not and would not be retracted, ever.

What Isaac did have for Esau was a prophetic word Esau, I'm sure, did not want to hear:

³⁸ Esau said to his father, "Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me, *even* me also, O my father." So Esau lifted his voice and wept. ³⁹ Then Isaac his father answered and said to him, "Behold, away from the fertility of the earth shall be your dwelling, And away from the dew of heaven from above. ⁴⁰ "By your sword you shall live, And your brother you shall serve;



But it shall come about when you become restless, That you will break his yoke from your neck."

Admit it. You could not get a more exact opposite statement. Jacob's life would enjoy the rich blessing of God, while Esau would live a hardscrabble, tough life in an almost barren land. I have driven through this area and I can say that Isaac was right.

It's not a real desirable, fertile place. You see a lot of sand, and just a few trees. Really, the whole place is like perpetual beachfront. In fact, the longer you drive into this part of modern day Jordan, the sandier and more barren it becomes. And this is where God said Esau would wind up, and from this desolate region he would experience a continual dominance by the descendants of his younger brother. From the day of David in 1050 B.C. until the times of John Hyrcanus in 126 B.C., Jacob's people, Israel, did, in fact, dominate and subdue the people of Esau the Edomites.

Why did Esau wind up down here in the middle of nowhere? Knowing the ways of God, the answer is probably tied to God's justice against two men who sought to subvert His will. It's also probably wedded to God's desire to shape and hone the soul of Esau, to teach him the need to lean on God instead of himself, to teach him to put heavenly pursuits above earthly ones, and to give him time to see the importance of spiritual food in relation to earthly food. It was also probably a rebuff to Isaac designed to teach him to never challenge God's word and ways, but to unflinchingly follow Him without meddling in a carnal fashion.

Think about this pragmatically for a moment. The favoritism you evidence can eventually lead you and the child in question to a place where God has to move to get your collective attention in a sobering fashion. You had high hopes for your talented son to accomplish x, y, or z, but you failed to give adequate time and attention to a lesser gifted one. And the one you poured all your time, attention, money, and praise into developed some of your carnal, worldly, selfish aspirations, while neglecting and/or not desiring the things of God. When, not if, God seeks to wake you both up from the crooked road you are on, I pray you will move you to confession and restoration with the rest of the family. As we shall see, this is not what happened in this biblical family.

Danger #4: Discord (Genesis 27:41)

This one verse sums up the outcome of all of this parental favoritism:

⁴¹ So Esau bore a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him; and Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob."

Stealing the prophetic patriarchal blessing was the final straw in the relationship between Esau and his twin brother, Jacob. This event gave birth to a multi-generation grudge between Esau's descendants and those of Jacob. Shocking, isn't it? Literally, the Hebrew word for grudge (שָׂטָם *śāṭam*) speaks of laying a trap for an animal to step into so you can kill it.¹ That is just what Esau wanted to do to his brother. His anger boiled to the point he couldn't wait to use his hunting experience and weapons against Jacob.

And you thought your favoritism was warranted. Think again. It may not seem too destructive at this point in the lives of your children, but given time it can reach a point where those children actually hate each other because of how you treated or failed to treat them. If you are a parent, this is sound data from moving away from favoritism and toward treating your children as equitably as you can. Do this and you will potentially raise healthier, happier children who not only love you, but like to be together because they really love each other.

Ostensibly, I have to pose another question: Do you have a grudge against a brother or sister right now? Do they have a grudge against you because of something you've done or not done? Is your relationship with your sibling or siblings strained and testy? Do you

¹Wilhelm Gesenius, and Samuel Prideaux Tregelles. *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2003), 788:שָׂטָם fut. יִשְׂטֵם (cogn. to שָׂטָם) TO LAY SNARES for any one, TO FOLLOW hostilely, Genesis 27:41; 50:15; Job 16:9; 30:21. Specially, to lay a noose or trap, whence the derivative מִשְׂטָמָה.

even talk anymore? Did your mother and father blow it raising you? Did you find yourself in dysfunctional family where favoritism reigned supremely? Has it taken its toll on your sibling relationships? If so, here is some timely advice from the Apostle Paul:

¹¹ Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you (2 Corinthians 13).

Make peace a priority for you are related, as a believer to the God of peace. Translated, do what is necessary to attempt to be a peacemaker. Here's another Pauline insight:

³² (And) be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ (Ephesians 4).

When you consider how much Jesus has forgiven you, it makes forgiving your mother, father, brother, or sister pale into insignificance. Perhaps this day is the day to be kind to that family member who has created a great grudge in your relationship. Perhaps kindness starts with a text message, or a phone call followed by words like, "I'm sorry," or "I forgive you," or "Could you please forgive me?"

While you're thinking about what you need to do and who you need to talk to, consider the fifth and final danger of parental favoritism.

Danger #5: Deception (Genesis 27:42-46)

Deception is what you do when you don't want to deal with your sin. This is exactly what Rebekah does . . . it is her go to sin:

⁴² Now when the words of her elder son Esau were reported to Rebekah, she sent and called her younger son Jacob, and said to him, "Behold your brother Esau is consoling himself concerning you *by planning* to kill you. ⁴³ "Now therefore, my son, obey my voice, and arise, flee to Haran, to my brother Laban! ⁴⁴ "Stay with him a few days, until your brother's fury subsides, ⁴⁵ until your brother's anger against you subsides and he forgets what you did to him. Then I will send and get you from there. Why should I be bereaved of you both in one day?"

After all of this, Rebekah is right back at being a Mossad agent in her own home so she has all the right information to protect her chosen son. When she heard that Esau desired to take Jacob out, she should have gone directly to her husband with her concern, and together they should have brought the "boys" before them to sort things out. She didn't do anything resembling this, opting instead to keep the favoritism fires alive and well by sending Jacob quickly and quietly to her brother Laban. It would be a decision which would forever haunt her for she would never see her favored son again.

As the sad story began so it will end . . . with an over controlling mother using half-truths and lies to get what she wants from her unsuspecting husband. Listen carefully to what she says and doesn't say to Isaac in order to get him to approve of sending Jacob to Laban in Mesopotamia:

⁴⁶ Rebekah said to Isaac, “I am tired of living because of the daughters of Heth; if Jacob takes a wife from the daughters of Heth, like these, from the daughters of the land, what good will my life be to me?”

Funny how when she talks to her husband she is far from honest. She only tells him what she wants him to know, something she knows he'll agree to, all while she hides her real intention and motivation from him. Once more, when the two parents should have been open, honest, transparent, and authentic with each other, they chose to play games with half-truths. Isaac didn't tell his wife what Esau was up to, and Rebekah didn't tell Isaac what she and Jacob were up to. Deception had come full circle in this family, hadn't it?

What about your family? What about the way you talk to your husband or your wife? Are you guilty of holding back information about the children he or she needs to know? Are you guilty of shading situations to get the kind of response you want toward a given child you favor or don't favor? God could have done so much to heal this family if the adults had just come clean with one heart to heart conversation with each other. It never happened, and they basically lost both of their children.

Based on what happened to them, I can't help but say that God wants more for you and your family. Health and wholeness starts when you, as the parents, sit down and agree to treat each child in an equitable manner. Health and wholeness also starts when you, as parents, decide it's time to sit everyone down and have a real open, honest conversation about what's been going on that doesn't honor God and how you're going to go to head, by God's power, in a direction that will honor Him.

