

FAMILY MATTERS, MATTER

Two Bad Parents & Two Bad Brothers: Part 1

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Anyone remember this show? That's right, it *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. They were the epitome of a wholesome, caring, and fun-loving family, weren't they? I watched them until they went off the air in 1966. Not long after they went off the air, another kind of family came along. Recognize them? That's right, it's *All in the Family* and it aired from 1971 to 1983. What are they known for? One word, **dysfunction**. You name the issue and they had it: Name-calling. Mistrust. Anger. Harsh sarcasm.



Not long after they went off the air, Hollywood gave us another TV family to learn from (and model?) in 1988. The show's name? *Roseanne*. Believe me, they had their family issues and dysfunction too. Right before this



show went off the air in 1997, Hollywood served up another interesting family with, well, issues. Do you remember its name? Yep, it's *Everyone Loves*

Raymond. Again, they had their family strains and problems and addressed them in a comical fashion. The media took the family off the Ozzie and Harriet grid in 1998 with the introduction of *The Simpsons* cartoon series. This family is so dysfunctional, crude and rude, I've never watched one entire episode.



Looking at these TV families, I must say that the ones in the 50s and 60s were probably a bit too functional, while those beyond this are way too dysfunctional. No family is devoid of some degree of dysfunction and some families are only known for their inability to fly

right. However, if you are a Christian family, the goal is to move constantly, by the Spirit's help, from dysfunction to function, from weakness to strength, and from immaturity to maturity. So what about it, on a scale of one to ten, with ten being excellent family function and one being zero family function, where's your family?

Depending on where you are on this grid, you can learn how to move toward familial health and wholeness by studying a biblical family whose issues, basically, would make some in Hollywood blush. Put another way, by looking at a negative family situation we can, hopefully and prayerfully, gain some much needed insight into how to build a positive family experience. Who is the family? One you'd never expect. It's the family of Isaac and Rebekah and their sordid, convoluted, and carnal story is recorded in Genesis chapters 25 through 28.

From chapter 25, we learn how God answered the prayer of this barren, aging couple by giving them two twin boys, Esau and Jacob. Even while they were in the womb, they duked it out, which moved Rebekah to ask God what was going on inside her (Genesis 25:22). God answered by telling her she would bring forth two boys who would, in turn, become the progenitors of two nations (Genesis 25:23). However, there would be a twist, the younger son would rule over the older one. Once those boys hit the planet, the parents rightly named them. The firstborn son came out covered in hair so they called him, no, not Harry, but Esau, which means hairy in Hebrew. The second born son came out clutching the heel of the older one, so they called him, Jacob, or the supplanter.

The first son was a man's man. Had he been born in our era, the show **SURVIRORMAN** would have been built around his persona. He could have easily tried out for **SURVIVOR**, and I'm sure the Navy Seals, the Green Berets, or the Delta Force would have loved to tap into his outdoor and weaponry skills. Psychologically, he was impulsive and incapable of seeing how his current bad decisions might impact him negatively later. Three wives later, he still couldn't figure out how to build a functional, God-fearing family.



The second son was what we'd call a momma's boy. He always did what she said. He didn't like to get dirty. He'd never dream of shooting anything in order to eat it. He took care of his skin by staying inside, close to his mother. Psychologically, he was cunning and deceptive and willing to do most anything to get ahead in life.

As for the parents, they had their own glaring issues. Genesis 25, verse 28 pretty much sums up the core of their problem: "*And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah love Jacob.*" You might need to read over that one more time. This time let it sink in as you ask yourself, "Am I guilty of showing favoritism of one child over another?" If you are, just know this is a destructive form of family dysfunction. What can undo favoritism do to a family? It can, and will, weaken and marginalize it.

- Favoritism devalues one child while wrongly elevating another child.
- Favoritism discourages one child while encouraging another.
- Favoritism can create an air of animosity between siblings.
- Favoritism is certainly incongruent with God's holy character (Romans 2:11).
- Favoritism fails to see we are all equal before God even though we are all quite different (Galatians 3:28).
- Favoritism toward children will logically spill into other relationships.
- Favoritism will ill-prepare a child for dating and marriage for they will not know how to see the true worth in people.
- Favoritism can lead to raising children who are awash in feelings of bitterness and anger.
- Favoritism can make your marriage complicated as one parent is pitted against the other.
- Favoritism can make step-children feel like they are step below your blood children.

Need I say more? Yes. Why? Because the negative example we encounter in the lives of Isaac and Rebekah and their two sons can positively show us how to grow families to God's glory. In addition, their twisted historical tale can show us that no matter how favoritism inhibits the functioning of our families, God is providential and He will work in and through broken families like this to accomplish His beautiful, magnificent, and lofty plan. That's another sentence you might need to read again. Despite your mess ups as parents and brothers and sisters, God is working in the quagmire to potentially bless you and use you to accomplish things which will echo in eternity. Please, don't forget this premise as we dive headfirst into one of the Old Testament's most fractured families.

So, what about it? What does the story of Jacob and his lovely wife Rebekah teach us about the dangers of favoritism? Believe me, it won't take long to isolate the educational moments. We'll dive into their story in Genesis chapter 27.

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

Before we study this historical episode, permit me to give you a little background. You will remember that prior to this chapter, Jacob had essentially stolen the coveted birthright from his brother, Esau, by offering him bread and a bowl of red lentil stew when he came in famished from being out in the wild (Genesis 25:28-34). Esau, whom Scripture classifies as a sinful man (Hebrews 12:16), cared more for his momentary physical hunger than he did for the more important spiritual dimensions as the firstborn of the family line which had come down from Shem, the son of Noah. Jacob cared too much for the blessing God had promised him prior to his birth, and his passionate desire to fulfill God's plan for him motivated him to not wait on God in faith to work out the details. The mealtime transaction would be one that would become a wedge between the two brothers, and it would also serve as a launch pad in the chapter before us for Rebekah to stealthily work to acquire the paternal blessing on the firstborn for Jacob, not Esau.

Genesis chapter 27 reads like the script for a modern TV show about a really messed up family. Your family dysfunction might be different from theirs, but theirs is quite apparent. As we've said, it's called favoritism between children. We see its destructive ways as we methodically move through the inspired text, and we also hope to move to constructive concepts to equip you to grow in this area if this is a sin in your family.

Verses 1 through 8 give us the opening scene which sets up the story about how a little favoritism led to a whole lot of hurt.

¹ Now it came about, when Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, that he called his older son Esau and said to him, "My son." And he said to him, "Here I am." ² Isaac said, "Behold now, I am old and I do not know the day of my death. ³ "Now then, please take your gear, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me; ⁴ and prepare a savory dish for me such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die."

Hold it right there. Let's make an observation. What in the world is Isaac doing? He knew God would bless the second born son, Jacob, and not the firstborn one, but here he sets up a situation where his favored son, Esau, can, at least, receive his divinely inspired and prophetic familial blessing. Why did he do this? Simple. He favored this son over the other son. He liked the hunter, macho, Conan the Barbarian-type son over the tent dwelling one. See what favoritism can do to you? It can motivate you to work against what God wants from a given child, and it can cause you to act in a faithless fashion. When he should have leveled with his grown son, when he should have told him the truth, he selfishly sought to privately promote him despite God's prophetic word to the contrary. Amazing. All of this should cause you to ask yourself: Is my favoritism causing me to twist God's Word so I can get what I want? Have I purposefully ignored God's teaching so I can push my favored child in the direction I want?

Back to the sordid story. Just when Isaac thought he had a private conversation with Esau, Rebekah, the information gathering machine, was eavesdropping like some kind of Mossad officer on a clandestine operation.

⁵ Rebekah was listening while Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game to bring home,

Her name stands emphatically at the head of the sentence to underscore the shocking nature of her motherly activity. The verb following her name can be classified as a durative use of the participle, thereby highlighting she kept her ear to the wall for the entire juicy conversation (וְרֵבֶקָה שֹׁמְעֵת). What nerve! How nosy! Again, this is what favoritism will do to you. You'll tend to go to unimaginable, unhealthy lengths to acquire information which may put your favored child in the proverbial background. You can readily see how this might play out in a blended family, where a father might promise his blood child a special thing/experience, while neglecting to do the same for his other non-blood children. What might you do? Read a text message on someone else's phone. Secretly surf through emails in someone else's Gmail or Outlook account. You get the picture.

Armed with the potentially destructive news, Rebekah, the control freak, couldn't wait to talk with and tell Jacob what he needed to do to rectify the situation so he'd come out on top. Imagine, instead of trusting God to work out the prophetic details, she hatches her own misguided, the-ends-justifies-the-means plan to help God.

⁶ Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "Behold, I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, saying, ⁷ 'Bring me some game and prepare a savory dish for me, that I may eat, and bless you in the presence of the LORD before my death.' ⁸ "Now therefore, my son, listen to me as I command you.

You just know this conversation is going to head south, don't you? After she tells Jacob what she should have kept confidential, she does what she does best. She, the Queen of the family, gives us the first of several maternal commands. Since the verb does not come first in the sentence, her words are the epitome of force:

וְעַתָּה בְּנִי שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי

Translated, "Look here, Jacob, mother wants you to do exactly what I command you in order to make sure you get the blessing from your father and not Esau." As we will see in the text, she has a penchant for bossing Jacob around, and for making him do her bent bidding. Some might call her a helicopter parent. You know the type. They hover over their children to make sure they are not just protected, but do exactly what the parents want them to. I know of one lady who flies every weekend down the state of California to be near her daughter who is finishing up college at a big state run university. Can you say the phrase, "Let go?" Some can't, especially if it is a favorite child. They'll hover close so they can control the direction of the child in question, and in so doing they squelch the child's ability to grow and flourish on their own.

Andrea Bonoir Ph.D. lists the earmarks of an overly controlling parent in her *Psychology Today* article titled appropriately, *20 Signs Your Partner is Controlling*. Here's a few of them:

- Isolating you from friends and family.
- Chronic criticism.
- Veiled or overt threats.
- Making acceptance/caring/attraction conditional. Can't you hear Rebekah say, "Jacob, if you don't do this, I will not be happy with you"?
- Spying, snooping, or requiring constant disclosure. Yikes. That's exactly what Rebekah did.
- Inability or unwillingness to ever hear your point of view. Rebekah never asked Jacob what he thought about the situation.¹ She merely commanded him to follow to the letter what she thought and what she wanted. Period. End of discussion.

Chances are good that if you are a controlling parent you are all about using your power and position to advance a given chosen child. Such activity, my friend, is not becoming of a growing disciple of Jesus Christ. Children should be treated with equality, and none should be elevated above another, and a parent should not misuse their God-given role to control a favored child's life to fulfill what the parent desires above all else. Rebekah, unfortunately, never received the memo, and now we're prepared to see what parental favoritism did to this dysfunctional family.

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

Structurally, the lengthy passage is composed of six movements, with the climax of the story occurring in verses 27 through 29 where Isaac gives the prophetic paternal blessing to the "wrong" son, Jacob. Before we consider this panel dealing with deception, it would be helpful to consider all of them in sequential order:

- Panel 1: Isaac and Esau (vv. 1-4)
- Panel 2: Rebekah and Jacob (vv. 5-17)
- Panel 3: Isaac and Jacob (vv. 18-29)
- Panel 4: Isaac and Esau (vv. 20-41)
- Panel 5: Rebekah and Jacob (vv. 42-45)
- Panel 6: Rebekah and Isaac (vv. 46)

What's missing in this structure? The two brothers never had a conversation. They didn't talk with each other throughout all of the cloak and dagger maneuvering. Communication is a wonderful thing, especially if it is open, honest, authentic, and transparent. Unfortunately, the relationship between the two boys went completely south as they failed to talk with each other, and they had learned well, hadn't they, from

¹ Andrea Bonoir, *20 Signs Your Partner is Controlling*, *Psychology Today*, Jun 3 1, 2015, accessed May 4, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/friendship-20/201506/20-signs-your-partner-is-controlling>.

their favoritism laden parents? They didn't talk until the whole tragic affair had created a toxic, potentially murderous wedge in the family, and, as we shall see, even that conversation, led my Rebekah, contained half-truths and disinformation in order for her to really get her way the end with her favored son. Shocking, isn't it? Once more, all of this should stop you and make you ask yourself: Am I really talking to my wife, my husband, and/or my children? Are they talking to us? Are they talking to each other to work out family issues and problems, or is everyone just heading off to their safe, quite spaces? Perhaps it's time to sit down and have a real open, heart-to-heart talk about the elephant in the proverbial living room. Do this and God will bless you with peace and direction. Isaac and Rebekah didn't and their family was torn apart by their blind commitment to favoring one boy over the other.

As noted, favoritism led to outright deception. Sin typically tempts us to head in directions we never dreamed of in order to get what we want, especially where a child is concerned. My jaw is always on the floor when I read how this mother and son duo acted in order to obtain the prophetic paternal blessing. We'll move through the record while making observations along the way regarding the dangerous nature of favoritism.

⁹ “Go now to the flock and bring me two choice young goats from there, that I may prepare them *as* a savory dish for your father, such as he loves. ¹⁰ “Then you shall bring *it* to your father, that he may eat, so that he may bless you before his death.”

Without missing a beat, Rebekah is back at giving Jacob, a fully grown man, orders. Two commands echoed in his ears: Go (לֵךְ) and bring/seize (קַח). Remember how industrious she was as a young woman when she watered Abraham's servants camels when he came looking for a son for his master (Genesis 24)? Funny how sin has twisted this strength into a weakness as she uses it to acquire Isaac's blessing covertly for Jacob. One must be aware at all times how personality strengths can become sinful weaknesses (loyalty/disloyalty; independence/dependence; patience/impatience; leading/bossing; humorous/sarcastic; accepting/judgmental et al). What should she have done? If her husband thought he was near death, she should have consoled him. She didn't. She, also, should have gone straight to her husband with her concerns but she didn't, opting to take of things herself through Jacob . . . her willing accomplice. Dysfunction, be what it may, really causes you to behave in a way years before you might have found shocking.

The conversation next moved from Rebekah to Jacob:

¹¹ Jacob answered his mother Rebekah, “Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man and I am a smooth man. ¹² “Perhaps my father will feel me, then I will be as a deceiver in his sight, and I will bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing.”

Interesting. Jacob's concern in the conspiracy isn't moral. He's only concerned with getting caught ben being forever cursed. Again, what should he have done as a grown man? He should have confronted his mother, but he didn't for years of favoritism and selfish maneuvering showed him he could get what he wanted if he just followed his lead and that of his meddling mother.

Rebekah's reply shows you just how dysfunction can cause you to speak in the most shocking fashion:

¹³ But his mother said to him, "Your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, get *them* for me."

When she should have agreed with Jacob's appraisal and backed off her pernicious plan, she arrogantly plowed ahead, thinking that her thinking would rule the day. How did Jacob respond to his controlling mother? He did what she said because that's how he, the favored son, always acted.

¹⁴ So he went and got *them*, and brought *them* to his mother; and his mother made savory food such as his father loved. ¹⁵ Then Rebekah took the best garments of Esau her elder son, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her younger son. ¹⁶ And she put the skins of the young goats on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. ¹⁷ She also gave the savory food and the bread, which she had made, to her son Jacob.

Can you believe this? She so favored Jacob over Esau (what had he ever done to her?) she's willing to dress Jacob up so he can deceive her almost totally blind husband. Where's the compassion? Sin in a family has a way of building a hard callous over one's formerly soft, caring heart. She made the food she knew her husband would love, and she must have been some kind of cook to take goat meat and make it taste like meat from wild animals. Looking at the skins from the young goats she used to make the meal, it must have dawned on her how supply they were and perfect to place on Jacob's body to imitate the hairy nature of Esau. I'm sure she was amazed at how easily her plan fell into place.

The last part of this evil episode shows how the mother's obsession and penchant for deception and lying became that of her son, Jacob.

¹⁸ Then he came to his father and said, "My father." And he said, "Here I am. Who are you, my son?"

It is possible the voices of Esau and Jacob sounded similar, which may account for Isaac's opening question.

Without missing a beat, Jacob developed the deception to his blind father:

¹⁹ Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn; I have done as you told me. Get up, please, sit and eat of my game, that you may bless me."

Wondering how Esau came back so quickly from this particular hunting trip, not to mention how quickly the wild game was cooked to perfection, Isaac asks another question:

²⁰ Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have *it* so quickly, my son?"

In our vernacular, it's as if he said, "Wait a minute. You just left on your hunting excursion, and you mean to tell me you are already back with the fully cooked grub? No way. You've never done that before."

Pay close attention to how one lie for Jacob led to another. This next lie is one founded upon completely blasphemy:

And he said, "Because the LORD your God caused *it* to happen to me."

At this point, Jacob validated his deception with the providential workings of the living God. Mark this well. The dysfunction you are teaching your child will lead them, barring their leaning of Christ, to going from one low level sin to a higher one.

Isaac may have been blind, but he still smelled a rat. The facts just didn't add up, so he makes a request of "Esau,"

²¹ Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Please come close, that I may feel you, my son, whether you are really my son Esau or not." ²² So Jacob came close to Isaac his father, and he felt him and said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau." ²³ He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him.

Even with all of this tactile evidence, Isaac's gut still told him something fishy was going on in the family.

²⁴ And he said, "Are you really my son Esau?" And he said, "I am."

With this final lie, Jacob had replaced Esau. The story concludes with the paternal prophetic blessing going to the younger son, not the older son:

²⁵ So he said, "Bring *it* to me, and I will eat of my son's game, that I may bless you." And he brought *it* to him, and he ate; he also brought him wine and he drank. ²⁶ Then his father Isaac said to him, "Please come close and kiss me, my son." ²⁷ So he came close and kissed him; and when he smelled the smell of his garments, he blessed him and said, "See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field which the LORD has blessed; ²⁸ Now may God give you of the dew of heaven, And of the fatness of the earth, And an abundance of grain and new wine; ²⁹ May peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you; Be master of your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be those who curse you, and blessed be those who bless you."

The deception was now complete and had acquired what Rebekah and Jacob had desired, viz., the coveted Abrahamic blessing on Jacob's family line. And they had done all of their dirty work without relying for one moment on faith in God's ability to fulfill his own prophetic word concerning the two boys. This is what the dysfunction we call favoritism can do to you, too. It can cause you to not only divide your family, but it can cause you to live as if God is not in control.

So what about it? Is favoritism your family dysfunction? If so, God wants you to come clean right now by way of confession. You say, "Well, too much damage has been done in our family by our dysfunction. I think we are beyond hope." That is just not the truth, friend. Even despite the sinful activity of all the members of this family, the living and loving God worked in and through their dysfunction to accomplish His providential purposes. Jacob would become the father of the tribes of Israel, and ultimately the Messiah would come through the tribe of Judah. I'd say since God can do this with this family, there is no telling what He can do with your family if you'll but humble yourself before Him, seeking His will and not your will.

