

MARRING FAMILY LIFE

GENESIS 25:27-28

27 So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents.

28 And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

GENESIS 27:30-35

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

31 He also had made savory food, and brought it to his father, and said to his father, “Let my father arise and eat of his son’s game, that your soul may bless me.”

32 And his father Isaac said to him, “Who are you?” So he said, “I am your son, your firstborn, Esau.”

33 Then Isaac trembled exceedingly, and said, “Who? Where is the one who hunted game and brought it to me? I ate all of it before you came, and I have blessed him – and indeed he shall be blessed.”

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

35 But he said, “Your brother came with deceit and has taken away your blessing.”

LUKE 12:13-15

13 Then one from the crowd said to Him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

14 But He said to him, “Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?”

15 And He said to them, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.”

Introduction

The family is a place of refuge. From the security of its borders, individuals venture into a demanding and threatening world. Within the family, children are socialized; they learn to treat others with kindness and respect. Self-discipline and a sense of justice prepare them to function in broader society. That is the way it ought to be, but the family is not necessarily that sort of place. In extreme cases people living under the same roof use and abuse one another to the degree that all semblance of decency and order is smothered in angry words, rage and violence.

Dysfunctional families are evidenced in the headlines of newspapers. A 15-year-old boy hated his sister so much that he took a hunting rifle and, while she slept, pumped three bullets into her head. A mother placed her week-old infant in a shopping bag and abandoned it in a trash bin. Behind every headline is a story

of irresponsibility, selfishness and deceit. They are testimony to the tension that characterizes many homes. Discontent and bitterness are not reserved for those who become statistics in court dockets. Many families struggle along with a kind of quiet desperation, miserably failing to live up to what they could be. The Bible identifies the roots of many family problems and offers solutions that millions have found to be enriching and satisfying.

Partiality (Genesis 25:27-28)

A dictionary definition of “partiality” says it is “the showing of favoritism or bias.” For those who are not favored, who feel the bias, the definition may be less than satisfying. Partiality is more than bias; it is more like an assault. Those who are partial tend to deny arbitrary, self-serving motives that are apparent to others. The closer the relationship, the more devastating partiality can be. When an employer shows favoritism in the workplace, it is likely to be aggravating but nothing more. In the family favoritism is not only painful; it is likely to be deeply personal. Children sometimes carry the scars of real or perceived favoritism with them to the grave.

Isaac and Rebecca had only two children, twin boys. Esau was the older, the one favored by custom and law. Isaac favored him. Esau was a rugged sportsman who enjoyed a hunt and the taste of wild game. Rebecca favored Jacob, the quieter of the two, the one who showed deference and respect to her. Years of family tension had preceded the summary statement of Genesis 25:27-28.

Modern parents who are partial to one of their children often deny vehemently what is obvious to others. One child may have a ready smile that the other lacks. One may be well-coordinated and good at athletics, and another may be clumsy. One may be pretty and popular, another quiet and distant. No two children are the same. Showing no partiality means more than spending the same on birthday presents. It means accepting and even celebrating differences; it means bragging on and being proud of the accomplishments of each.

When a parent is partial, a family member or close friend might help by initiating a talk. An angry, accusatory confrontation is likely to accomplish nothing, but a calm, frank discussion may help. Not infrequently, a parent is blind to the favoritism he or she is showing. Concrete examples may cause a parent to be more sensitive. A parent is unwise who responds to favoritism by trying to compensate an overlooked child. The result may be a divided family, two against two, one child favored by father and another by mother. That happened in the family of Isaac and Rebecca, and the result was predictably tragic.

Deceitfulness (Genesis 27:30-35)

The partiality of Isaac and Rebecca matured into resentment, plots, lies, hatred and murderous intent. With failing eyesight in his old age, Isaac wanted to give the patriarchal blessing to his favored son. He asked Esau to prepare game for him as a prelude to blessings, but Rebecca overheard the request and hatched a plot to thwart his intent. She instructed Jacob to slaughter a kid that she would prepare. He would disguise himself as Esau and bring it to Isaac. If all went well, Jacob would receive the blessing from his father. In the end Isaac believed the lie of his

son Jacob, kissed him, and gave him the blessing he had reserved for Esau.

God seemed to empower Isaac so that the words spoken to Jacob, once released from his mouth, had some inherent force of their own. They could not be retracted. With some mysterious power of their own, the words of the patriarch would bring about the blessing the patriarch described. After Rebecca and Jacob had completed their deceit, Esau appeared, game in hand, prepared in the way Isaac loved it. Thinking nothing to be wrong, he asked his father to arise and give him the blessing. Isaac was at a loss. He had just given his blessing to a man he took to be Esau. Visibly shaken, he realized Jacob had fooled him. Isaac could only say of the younger brother, “indeed he shall be blessed.” The patriarch could do nothing to reverse what had happened. He could only give voice to the obvious, “Your brother came with deceit and has taken away your blessing.” It is no surprise when the story continues. Esau hated his brother and planned to murder him (Genesis 27:41).

The intrigues and rivalry between Esau and Jacob leave neither brother looking like a paragon of virtue. An earlier narrative (Genesis 25:29-34) describes how Esau had despised his birthright and sold it to Jacob “for one morsel of food” (Hebrews 12:16). However the guilt of each is to be assessed, clearly no great love was lost between them. They were brothers who might have complemented each other. They might have appreciated one another, not in spite of their differences but because of them. The partiality of their parents was instrumental in the formation of the rivalry and deceit that made it difficult for bonds of affection and trust to form. When siblings and parents are willing to deceive, bonds of family unity can hardly flourish.

Dissatisfaction (Luke 12:13-15)

When preachers get together they sometimes share laughter and wagging of heads by trading stories. Some of the stories are fun and some tragic. Marriage and funerals commonly come up. Preachers and undertakers have tragic stories to tell about funerals, and the subject may not be about sorrow over the death of a loved one. It is apt to be about the disposal of property. Intra-family fights, inspired by greed in some case, by demands for fairness in others, can leave wounds that a lifetime will not heal. The love of money can and does mar bonds of family love and unity. Paul said it well: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10).

The disciples of Jesus had their own stories to tell. Many years after His death, they likely told new converts about the time Jesus had been teaching profound spiritual lessons. He had warned them about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (Luke 12:1) and the coming judgment (vv. 4-5). He had reassured them about the love and care that God had for each of them (v. 7), and promised the guidance of the Holy Spirit (v. 12). One man in His audience heard nothing of Jesus’ words. He was preoccupied. He had not come to hear Jesus teach; he had come for redress of a wrong. When the Lord took a long breath, the man rudely interrupted. As far as he was concerned, redress of the wrong done him was more important than anything Jesus had to say.

Apparently, this man’s father had died in the recent past; the expected distribution of property followed. According to the Law, the oldest brother was to receive a double portion (Deuteronomy 21:17). The man who interrupted Jesus may not have

been the oldest brother. That may have been his complaint. But Luke does not go into detail. The man might have been genuinely wronged. But Jesus' response had a hint of irritation: "Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?" (Luke 12:14). The Lord followed with a word of wisdom that everyone would do well to memorize: "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses" (v. 15). Affection and goodwill in a family are often marred for life when one loves things more than brothers, sisters or parents.

Conclusion

Partiality, deceitfulness and greed are only a few of the dispositions that can be ugly smudges on the love and belonging of family life. One of the ironies of sin is that the perpetrators suffer most. Nowhere is that more evident than in family life. A marriage or a home can slide into a dysfunctional format wondering how it got there. The entry ramp of the highway of sin is easier to find than the exit. A wise man observed, "As no one is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practice it" (Ecclesiastes 8:8 NIV84).

The longer practices are worn into family life, the more difficult it is to alter them. Some families may benefit from family counseling. Elders or the preacher may be able to help. Sometimes an outside voice can bring a new perspective and initiate healing. Having less than a perfect family life is no shame. It *is* a shame when a family allows itself to sink into the mire of dysfunctionality without taking steps to make things better.

Questions

1. Ideally, how does a family prepare children to function in larger society?
2. Which of the two sons of Isaac and Rebecca sold his birthright?
3. What kind of man was Esau that led to his father's favoritism?
4. What kind of man was Jacob that caused his mother to be partial to him?
5. What did Isaac send Esau to do as a prelude to the bestowal of blessings on him?
6. What plot did Rebecca and Jacob carry out to secure Isaac's blessing for Jacob?
7. What did Isaac say would be the result of his giving the blessing to Jacob?
8. What indicates that the man who interrupted Jesus about an inheritance matter had not been listening to Him teach?
9. What was the complaint of the man who interrupted Jesus?
10. What warning about possessions did Jesus give to the man who interrupted him?

Discussion Questions

1. How common are dysfunctional families? What contemporary news stories or statistics testify to forces that mar family love and peace?
2. Why are partiality and favoritism destructive to family harmony? What kinds of things may lead a parent to show favoritism?
3. Why is the warning of Jesus about covetousness particularly relevant for modern family life?
4. What steps can a modern parent take to lift family life out of behavior that is destructive to family harmony? Is it shameful to seek help?