

Family Math: Division

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Today we are talking about families. The word "family" is filled with sentimental thoughts. "Family" sounds like playing a card game and drinking hot chocolate while chestnuts are roasting on an open fire. "Family" hearkens thoughts of the way families should be. Loving. Encouraging. Caring. Mutually helpful. People you can depend on. They have your back. They are for you.

But what is the reality? Families can and will be all those things, but another reality about family relationships is that they are often strained by selfishness, entitlement, and bitterness. I recently read one thing about being in a family is that you know where the bodies are buried. You know the family baggage. The flashpoints. The history and drama. The skeletons in the closets. All families have historical closets we would rather not open.

So much of the quality of family relationships depends on being good at one thing. Not a thousand things. *One thing*. Families rise and fall on their ability to resolve conflict.

Marriages often rise and fall on this. Sibling relationships rise and fall on this. Parental and in-law relationships rise and fall on this. When division comes, how good are we at resolving conflicts and going on in love?

So, our message today in our Family Math series is Division. The divided family. How do we keep family relationships harmonious? How do we protect them from declining into toxicity?

Why Do Families Divide?

From one perspective it's amazing any families remain unified at all. Why? When you are family, you know so much about each other; the good and the bad. It's only the unique stretchy nature of familial love that keeps us bound together. That and shared DNA. But even the healthiest families have deep relational problems.

If it's safe to talk about your own family, I'll talk about my own. The DeWitts are all Christians. What a blessing to know that our immediate family relationships will go on forever. My dad was a long-time lay church leader. A deacon. A Sunday School teacher. Both my sisters are leaders in their churches. My brother Scott was a missionary in South America and currently is a senior pastor in Nebraska. You know what I do. That sounds like a family formula for near heaven on earth. Chestnuts perpetually roasting on an open fire. Except my family is just like your family.

I remember one experience while my brother was a missionary. A group of us went down to see Scott and his family. We missed them. At large expense, we flew down. It was great seeing them and the grandkids. One night we decided to go to some local hot springs. Sounds great, right. Wrong. Why? Because there were different hot springs to choose from with various amenities and price points. Dad wanted to go to one. Other family members wanted to go to another. Another family member who might pastor a church in Indiana wanted to go a different one. Guess what happened? What should have been a great family experience turned unpleasant. We ended up going to one, but nobody was happy about it. Hot springing on another continent sounds dreamy except when you're with family.

But this is how it goes in families, even the best ones. I think one encouragement to all families is simply that all families have conflict. All families have problems. When we are in the midst of the latest family dust up, we shouldn't think, *the Johnsons never have problems like this! The Smith family seems to be perfect and ideal at church every Sunday.* I've pastored for a long time now and I'm here to tell you, the better they look on Sunday, the worse they are on Monday. That's not true, but for a second didn't we all feel better about ourselves?

Last week we talked about marriage. The justified marriage. Justification should shape our expectations for the spouse we married. Jesus died for sinners. Not decently good people who just barely miss heaven, but fundamentally depraved people. No matter who you marry, you marry a sinner. Your spouse has already figured out they married a sinner too. By allowing the gospel to shape my expectation of who I marry and what even the best redeemed marriage can be helps minimize the shock. I married a sinner.

This is important in family relationships too. The difference is we *choose* who we marry. We're kind of stuck with the family we get, aren't we? Maybe that's a help too; we all have the out, *hey folks, I was just born into this family.* It's plain old gospel truth that I'm a sinner in a family of sinners. God's people said, *Amen.* Maybe we should say it that way, *I'm a sinner* in a family of sinners. This explains where conflict comes from.

"Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." (James 3:13-18 ESV)

James is describing two kinds of wisdom or lives with two very different outcomes. The earthly way is jealousy and selfish ambition. Their outcomes are predictable—division and carnality. In contrast, is life according to the wisdom of God. These outcomes are dramatic and wonderful for any family—peace, gentleness, lots of mercy and sincerity.

Two kinds of wisdom. Two ways of living. Two kinds of families. This should give us encouragement that the way our family culture is, isn't the way it has to be. You are not stuck as a family. You are not permanently destined to continue the way you have been. Family culture can change, but part of that is understanding why we have conflict in the first place.

"What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask." (James 4:1-2)

James says, the source of all family division is our own hearts. *The passions at war within us.* The Greek word for "passions" is *strong desires*. God has strong desires. That's not a sin. The problem is that our strong desires are selfish. He summarizes these as, *"you desire and do not have,"* and *"you covet and cannot obtain."* We want things to be the way we want things to be. Strongly. You can tell how strongly you want something by how you react when you don't get it.

This is a parenting thing we are dealing with right now. Little girls have strong desires. We are trying to teach our daughters the proper way to respond to “no.” It’s a simple word. Two letters. No big deal except when you are 5 and 3, it is a big deal. What happens? *No*. The face gets scrunchy. The skin color turns red. There is a deep breath and out comes the most dreadful sound. *Waaaah!*

How many of our family problems sound like grown up versions of *Waaaah*? We’re going to this hot spring. *Waaaah!* Why? We desire strongly what we want.

James doesn’t say we cry when we don’t get our way. He says it far more strongly, “*You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.*” Is James saying literally, *you people are murdering each other*? No. But the seeds of murder are there.

What is the most volatile call police get? Domestic dispute. That’s a powder keg. Many years ago, there was a couple who came to our church after a horrible family dispute where the son-in-law shot through a closed interior door trying to kill his in-laws.

I did a funeral some years ago in which a man had been mysteriously murdered. His wife and adult children sat in the front row during the service looking completely mournful. I discovered in the weeks that followed that they had murdered the man. Those are extreme cases, but I guarantee each of them didn’t start with murder. They started with “*you desire and do not have.*”

While you may not be at the murder stage, because of unresolved conflict, many families simply live together on a perpetual emotional simmer. It doesn’t take much to explode. This explains most family reunions. They sound great in theory until you realize you have to do a seating chart to make sure Uncle Fred doesn’t sit by Aunt Mabel.

We obviously all crave harmony in our families. How do we get there?

From Peace-Faking to Peacemaking

Anyone can do peace-faking. Peacemaking requires making the effort peace requires. The hard work of peace is why many families don’t experience it. Peacemaking is the key to a family culture of peace. Culture is shaped over time. Nobody does it anywhere near perfect, but getting good at handling conflict biblically will, over time, create a framework within which peace can be made.

Peace-faking comes naturally. A family can be in the midst of a knockdown argument until the doorbell rings. *Hello!* We are all good at peace-faking. Success in families comes to the degree we become good at peacemaking.

Biblical peacemaking is the appropriating of vertical reconciliation received from God to horizontal reconciliation with others.

How were we reconciled to God? It required active peacemaking—God’s initiative to address the core problem of our sin with Jesus’ death on the cross. God’s reconciliation with us applied blood-bought grace and forgiveness to the root problem—sin. God was not passive aggressive. He was peace aggressive. The result for those who receive this salvation by faith is peace with God. Romans 5:1, “*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God.*” There is now harmony with God. Vertical peacemaking required God

to do something about sin. Not passive but active. God is the ultimate peacemaker. Vertical. Jesus urges to do this peacemaking horizontally.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." (Matthew 5:9)
Peacemaking culture requires initiative. Dad, call a family meeting. Care enough to discuss the conflict.

The Stages of Peacemaking

Bear with it

"Bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." (Colossians 3:13)

What do we bear with for the sake of peace? The little daily annoyances, personality traits, and preference matters. They don't rise to the level of calling for a peace summit. When we make a big stink out of an insignificant thing we come across as petty, which only makes actual peace harder. What should we do with the non-sin idiosyncrasies everybody has? *Do to others as you would have them do to you.* Do you want peace summit level inquisition about your quirks? Every single person has qualities that require the people around them to simply bear with them. Bearing in love is good, especially when people bear with us.

Sometimes in conflict or disagreement, this requires us to just agree to disagree. Bear with their opinion or preference. It's a broken world. We don't all agree. Let's go on for Jesus.

Cover it

"Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8)

Now we are on the level of actual sin or more serious offense. Wrongs done to us. If we have to confront and reconcile every sin we notice in anyone, we will be full-time sin inspectors. Yet Jesus said if we want to be inspecting sin full-time, we should inspect our own sin full-time.

"You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." (Matthew 7:5)

I have called this stretchy love. The kind of love that stretches and can cover in the sense that it has a posture of grace toward the failures of others. God is gracious toward my sin. When I see a selfish spirit in a family member, OK. My posture toward that sin is to cover it with grace and leave it to God. This calls us to be slow to anger. Slow to annoyance.

When should I cover it and when should I confront it? Is this offense hindering our relationship? Am I able to place it in a mental category where I'm free to love and share with this person? If not, then it calls for the next step in peacemaking.

Confront it

This is active peacemaking. Passive aggressiveness kicks in and our instinct is to withdraw when what we really need to do is engage. Time doesn't allow an exposition of Matthew 18 and what Jesus says. *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother."* (Matthew 18:15)

We unfortunately see that as a church discipline text when 99% of the time it's a guide to peacemaking in relationships. Go to the person and point out the fault. Obviously, this is not permission to be obnoxious or holier than thou. We go to make peace. Peacemaking is both an attitude and an action. We go to reconcile the relationship by reconciling the offense.

This requires winsomeness and wisdom, but don't let that keep you from doing it. We all should realize that when someone comes to us to be a peacemaker they are showing how important our relationship is. Passive aggressive demeans the value by being unwilling to do the hard work peace requires.

If this is relational conflict, it's rare that one person bears 100% of the fault. In reconciling, own up and confess your part, even if it's only 1% contribution. Confess the 1% before talking about their 99%. It makes it safer for the other person to own their percentage. Tone and timing are hugely helpful. *I know this is your wedding day, but can we talk about the swirlly you gave me in 3rd grade?* That's an example in the extreme. The goal is to win them back. To restore relational warmth. When and how we say what we say is so important. Pray and ask God to help you. Let's not ignore the role of prayer in reconciliation.

Choose to not remember it/hold it against

This is the final step. What does it mean to reconcile and forgive? I wish we could eliminate "forgive and forget" from our vernacular. That's helpful as it insinuates moving on, which is a great quality to have. However, God doesn't forget our sins. He is all-knowing. What does God do? He chooses not to remember them. He chooses not to hold them against us anymore.

When we say, I forgive you, we are saying three things:

- ***I will not hold this against you anymore***
- ***I will not hold it against you to others***
- ***I will not hold it against you in my heart anymore.***

To get to this, we have to frame this as forgiveness, not just "I'm sorry." Peacemaking requires the offending party to ask, "Will you forgive me?" and the offended party to express, "I do forgive you." Now the stinger is out, and healing can begin.

Things happen that you'll never technically forget. What can happen is, over time, I choose daily not to dwell on it against you. Eventually, it's not the first thing or the second thing I think about when I see you or think about you. The negative can be replaced with the positive. That's a great key to overcoming offenses—consciously remind yourself of positive experiences and positive qualities the person has. This creates gratitude and eventually appreciation for the person.

Too many times conflict is viewed as something that will always define the relationship. *I'll never get over this. This will always be a thing between us.* Hear me. Only if you choose to. The gospel applied horizontally allows for the worst offenses to be forgiven and peace to be restored.

Here it is winter in Northwest Indiana. Potholes are appearing everywhere. What's the difference between a pothole and the Grand Canyon? In Northwest Indiana, not that much.

Actually, the answer is obvious. Both are holes. One you drive over and you go on. The other you drive into and you never get out.

By God's grace, conflict in families can be potholes; bumps in the road if we follow these biblical principles of peacemaking. Are you a peace-faker or a peacemaker? Remember, you're a sinner in a family of sinners. Keep the bar of expectation realistic and see others through the lens of the gospel. Christian, it is the lens of grace and peace through which God has promised to look at you forever.

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