

When My Family is Seriously Messed Up

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Steve DeWitt

We began our family month in January with a message entitled, *When My Family isn't Perfect*. It seemed to strike a chord. The message bounced around online and Facebook with hundreds of views last I knew. Apparently there are a lot of imperfect families out there. Of course, all families are imperfect.

It's one thing to be an imperfect family. It's another to be a family in major crisis. Or a family with systemic long-term dysfunction. Or a family with an event or sin in the past that is unchangeable with life-long consequences. Not every family is seriously messed up but many, many are.

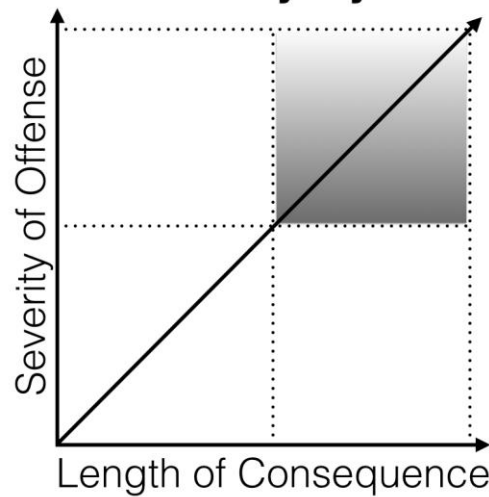
Over the years in ministry we have seen terrible things family members will do to one another. I could tell you first-hand stories of family lawsuits, family violence, family members shooting guns at each other, sexual abuse, abandonment, hateful and bitter words, and just about every other thing you can imagine. And I'm not a parole officer, I'm a pastor. Families can get really messed up and it is heartbreaking to see it. You may or may not be there but we all want to avoid going there, don't we? How? And what should we do when find ourselves in a really messed up family situation?

My encouragements in this message will assume that you are a genuine Christian. This message may go around the Internet too and if you are listening to it or reading it, please look in your heart and ask, *is Jesus the Lord and Savior of my life?* God often uses family pain to bring people to genuine faith.

Four Resolutions for a Christian in a Messed up Family

Family crisis comes in differing levels of severity and length of consequence.

Chart of Family Dysfunction



There are issues that are less severe and have no long-term consequence. Someone got worked up and said something they shouldn't have. The words have minimal consequence and weren't terribly offensive; just a little. To be in a family is to have these every day.

There are more severe offenses that are harder to forgive or overcome but they don't have long-term effects. There also are not very severe offenses that can have long-term consequences. These are moments of stupidity that sadly the family has to live with.

The worst are those highly severe and deliberate offenses that also have long-term and unchangeable consequences. Quadrant four (the shaded area in the illustration above) is the seriously messed up family. This isn't the angry word at the dinner table. This is Dad's left us, Mom's an alcoholic, my sister has two kids out of wedlock and they're all living in my basement, my brother is gay, and I'm the only Christian in the family wondering what on earth to do! Can you relate?

Does the Bible have anything to say about the seriously messed up family? Not only does it, it features families that would give yours a run for their money. The first oldest brother murdered his younger brother. The sons of the patriarch Jacob kidnapped and sold their brother Joseph as a slave, then lied to Dad about this for 22 years. The son of King David raped his sister and was later murdered by his brother. That same murderous brother treacherously betrayed his father. Moses' own sister turned against him. Solomon married 1,000 women and we can only imagine the dysfunction in that sorority house. Martin Luther adds some humor to this when he said, "Think of all the squabbles Adam and Eve must have had in the course of their nine hundred years. Eve would say, 'You ate the apple!' And Adam would retort, 'You gave it to me!'"¹

The Bible has a remarkable honesty about how family members can flat out sin against each other. In my own extended historical family tree we have secret children across national borders, stolen inheritances, questionable lineage, assumed identities, fake marriages...and those are just the dead family members. Deep family pain and disappointment are the human story. So what should we do? Christian, what if your family is a serious mess?

Resolution #1: My self-identity is ultimately in Christ, not my family

From the moment we are born, our first and most important earthly identity is in our families. The first thing we do is assume the family name. In our culture, that is our last name. Steve is my given name. DeWitt is my last name. From birth on, our family is the primary source of our identity and security and sense of belonging. This is a huge reason that a really messed up family is so painful. We are wired from birth to relate intimately to our family. We feel lost without them.

An example of this is in the movie *Castaway*. The main character played by Tom Hanks is in a plane crash. He washes ashore on an island in the middle of the ocean. He is there all alone. One day packages wash ashore and in them is a volleyball. Have you seen this? The ball is made by the company Wilson and he names him Wilson. The rest of the movie he treats Wilson like a real human being, like family. Somehow that seems plausible in his situation and with what we know about ourselves. We need someone we can identify with. For most people, biological family is at the top of the list.

¹ Martin Luther as quoted by Roland H. Bainton in *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, p. 308.

When we become a Christian, there is an identity that supersedes our family identity. I am a child of God and my identity forever is as a son or daughter of God himself.

- *"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."* (John 1:12 ESV)
- *"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."* (Ephesians 2:19)
- Hebrews 11 lists Moses as an example of this. He *"refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward."* (Hebrews 11:24-26)
- We see this even with Jesus himself: *"While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."* (Matthew 12:46-50)

This may sound disrespectful. It wasn't and we see Jesus' love for his mother even as he hung on the cross, asking John to care for her. What was Jesus saying here? He wasn't denying the importance of biological family. He was saying that those who identify with his life and mission are in a relationship with him that is more important and significant than biological family.

Think of that. Christianity doesn't replace family relationships. It provides something greater and more enduring. Families try to give that sense of lasting relationship. Go to a cemetery and you will see crypts with family names on them. Multiple family members buried together. Why? We want a sense that these relationships last forever. But they don't, do they? Earthly families are earthly families.

Jesus highlights a better family—an eternal one—not based on biological DNA but on sharing the same spiritual DNA; the eternal family of God. That sounds nice, but how does this help when your family is seriously messed up? The unbeliever has no other family than the one he's born into. He has neither the personal experience of saving grace nor the example of Jesus to follow. Is it any wonder that the calls cops hate to go on are the ones for domestic disturbance? They are the most dangerous, the most flammable, and often the most violent. The unbeliever struggles because that family is so important to them. It's all they have.

But the Christian is a member of two families: an earthly, flawed, and temporary one, AND a spiritual, eternal, and perfect one. Both are important. When my earthly family is frustrating and painful, I can take great comfort in my identity as a child of God and a member of his family forever.

Resolution #2: I am justified by faith, not my family

There is a doctrine that could free many of us from the pain of our family's dysfunction or a family member's rejection. It is the doctrine of justification. Justification is a holy God declaring sinners righteous. Luther called this the doctrine on which the whole of salvation stands or falls. In particular, that justification is by faith alone. *"Therefore, since we have*

been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1)

The reason faith has to be the basis for salvation is that if anything other than faith (which is a gift) provided salvation it would mean it came by some measure of human effort. A self-salvation. So God purposed the means to our salvation to be something that eliminates any human effort or boasting.

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith.” I am saved by faith. Specifically, I am saved by the object of my faith—Jesus and his work on the cross. By its very nature, justification keeps any number of other means to salvation out. Obeying the law. Being more moral than others. But not just these things, it means that a Christian must not look to anyone or anything else as our Savior. Not government. Not the church. Not any human being. For the sake of this talk, not the health of my family, not the approval of others about my family, and most importantly, not my family members themselves. My justification has nothing to do with my biological family, what they think of me, the quality of our relationships, or anything else.

I am declared righteous by Almighty God fully and freely by faith in his Son Jesus. Too many Christians affirm this doctrine but live like their family is their Savior. When my family is seriously messed up it devastates us more than it should. Not that family dysfunction is anything other than painful. It is. If my daughters reject me some day, I can't think of anything worse.

But here is where justification kicks in. It provides an oasis in our family pain and problems. It reminds me that I am accepted by God because of Jesus. Even when my family resembles a freak show, God accepts me for Jesus' sake. I came across this in my personal devotional reading this week, *“For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the LORD will take me in.”* (Psalm 27:10)

Resolution # 3: I don't have to get even or get the last word; Jesus will take care of that

“Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:17-21)

These are great verses if you are struggling with anger or bitterness toward a family member. Family members wrong us; some with great regularity. It's hard. Our natural response is to want to hurt back or go passive aggressive and withdraw relationship. Anyone in a cold war with a family member?

Paul exhorts us to do the opposite. You might say, *that doesn't seem right or I can't let my brother get away with that.* Actually, we can. The foundation to non-retaliation is verse 19, *“Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’”* Here is a promise. No sin ever done will go unpunished. God will make everyone right and he does so in two places. One is hell. Hell is eternal punishment for sin. The other is the cross. That doesn't mean a Christian family member gets away with anything. It means that I see the cross as sufficient payment for my

Christian brother's or sister's sin. Now I'm freed from taking matters into my own hands. God's got it covered. I'm free to love them in spite of what has happened. Was Jesus' death enough for what the family member has done against me? If it wasn't enough for his, what makes me think it was enough for mine?

So many family situations are the escalation of hostilities. This leads to that which leads to this or that. We break that cycle by trusting God's ability to make things right. This frees me to do the completely counterintuitive thing: bless those who persecute me; do good to those who do evil against me.

Why does God want us to do that? It keeps us from becoming the very thing we despise in a family member. If they hate me and I love them anyway, I am overcoming evil with good. Evil can't overcome evil any more than leukemia can overcome leukemia. Leukemia is treated with healthy blood cells.

What family situation do you have that as you read this you suspect the right application is for you to do the opposite of what you have done? I challenge you to go out today and give love, grace, kindness, gracious words, or forgiveness to that family member. Or maybe love means stopping the enabling of their dysfunction with some wise boundaries or new approaches. Do it and leave the justice to God.

"As long as you are tangled in wrong and revenge, blow and counterblow, aggression and defense, you will be constantly drawn into fresh wrong...Only forgiveness frees us from the injustice of others."²

Resolution #4: I will strive to turn the messes into mercies

"Family harmony is a good desire and something to work toward. But in God's plan, it may not be what is most needed. What may be most needed is for our family to be a crucible of grace, a place where the heat of pressure forces sin to surface providing opportunities for the gospel to be understood and applied. And when this happens, the messes become mercies."³

I have found in marriage that our strongest points of conflict are opportunities. Don't waste your conflicts! When it's raw, it's real. No one is faking. You are glimpsing the heart; the real essence of the other. These are the moments when God's love and grace to us extended to others completely without merit is so powerful.

What I am getting at is what Jesus called the second greatest commandment: *Love your neighbor as yourself.* (Matthew 22:39) Every single one of us is really good at loving someone whose life is full of sin and selfishness and pride. Who am I talking about?

C.S. Lewis says he never understood how to hate the sin but love the sinner. He writes, *"But years later it occurred to me that there was one man to whom I had been doing this all my life – namely myself. However much I might dislike my own cowardice or conceit or greed, I went on loving myself. There had never been the slightest difficulty about it. In fact the very reason why I had the things was that I loved the man. Just because I loved myself, I was sorry to find that I was the sort of man who did those things."⁴*

² Romano Guardini as quoted by Philip Yancey in *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, page unknown.

³ Jon Bloom, "God's Mercy in Messed Up Families," www.DesiringGod.org, May 24, 2013.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 117.

Now we are back where we started. The Christian's starting point isn't the sin of my family member but my sin against God. His grace to me. His mercy to me.

How many family members of people in the hearing of this message would be astonished into faith if we gave grace to them like God has given grace to us? Their jaws would drop. You would get questions like, why would you do this? *I'm turning this mess into a mercy. Can we start over?*

If they hear, perhaps you get a mom back. A son back. A sister back. If they scorn you or reject you, you still have a family—a forever family. You have a heavenly Father in God the Father, a brother in God the Son, and brothers and sisters in the family of God. Christian, when your family is seriously messed up, rest in the assurance of a perfect family someday.

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