

When My Family Isn't Perfect

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This was a hard message to prepare. For one, it's a huge subject and there are so many categories to it. All of them have shelves of books written addressing them. The harder part was thinking through it with all the baggage of my own story and family. The extended DeWitt family tree has some really shocking branches. With more time, I could tell stories that rival any soap opera.

Does your family have some skeletons in the closet? I assume that is true for everyone here. Anyone here have a perfect family? The temptation is to think about family members who are responsible for the imperfection—you might be compiling your list of names as I speak. Clearly, no families are perfect and most are not even close.

But some of us work pretty hard to make it appear that we are pretty close. The social media and Pinteresting of the American family allow us to show ourselves at our very best. Our family pictures have an ethereal glow to them (iPhones have cool effects). We post pictures of family that look eerily similar to the Garden of Eden. Perfect colors. Perfect smiles. Our Christmas cards and the inserted letters describe yet another year of amazing family harmony and accomplishment. It would appear most of us are nearly perfect people married to nearly perfect spouses parenting nearly perfect children. Are we perfect? *Nooooo...of course not...we are just closer to it than you are...*

On the other side of the spectrum are folks whose family has gone so wrong there's no hiding it. Your marriage ended in divorce. Your teen or adult child is off the rails. The feud between you and your siblings is obvious to everyone. Your family is a private chaos and a public mess. Yet, some of life's sweetest moments are spent with family.

Real family life tends to swing between these two polarities depending on the season. Right when we think maybe our marriage or family is about to recreate the Garden of Eden, something happens. Something's said. Something's decided. Whatever. Poof! Eden is gone. There is no changing it, just dealing with it.

I am going to propose a third option. Not changing it. Not dealing with it. But redeeming it. How?

We Must See Family Brokenness and Conflict Biblically

When there is a problem in our families, we nostalgically go back to the Garden of Eden. *"And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed."* (Genesis 2:25 ESV) This goes way beyond physical nakedness. Adam and Eve were in complete relational vulnerability and acceptance. There was nothing between them. No clothes. No conflict. No power struggles. No baggage of the past. No bitterness. They were the perfect family.

Besides the naked thing, we all crave what Adam and Eve had. *If only I was married to the perfect woman! If only I had children! If only I had more children! Then all would be perfect and whole.* But family life shocks us with the reminder that we aren't in the Garden of Eden anymore. Something devastating happened and family life and relationships have never been the same. Family relationships are often very disappointing. At their best, they are far from perfect. The sorrows we experience are a harsh reminder of the effects of sin.

- "None is righteous, no, not one." (Romans 3:10)
- "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

That's true of us and our family members. One thing we must do is manage our expectations. There will be many happy moments for sure. But what should we expect when you put two, three, or seven sinners in a home together? A lot of dysfunction. Don't be shocked. This isn't the Garden of Eden no matter what your Facebook would suggest.

Look in the mirror...you aren't perfect either

This is the natural application of Romans 3:23. We want to shift the blame of family imperfection onto those we perceive to be causing it. But if I embrace the fact that I am a sinner, that means I am personally contributing in some degree to the imperfection of this family.

Our family pain can often be traced to the idols of our hearts

What is an idol? An idol is anything that we look to for ultimate meaning and significance. Often idols are good things that we elevate to ultimate things. Must haves. I'm-not-complete-without-it things. So money, sex, happiness, success are all common idols. Can family be an idol? Can my kids and their success be an idol? Can the approval of family members be an idol?

It's easy to see idolatry with something like money. The foolish rich man said, *I will build bigger barns and take life easy*. God comes and says, *You fool! Tonight you die and then what comes of your money?* (Luke 12:16-21) Easy. His identity and sense of meaning in life were derived from the things he had.

Can family actually be an idol? Can marriage be an idol? Can I look to a parent, spouse, or child to be my earthly savior? Can I attach things to those relationships that provide my sense of worth? A parent's approval. A child's academic or athletic success. The appearance of a happy marriage. This isn't about the parent, spouse, or child but me deriving my meaning and worth from them. When my child does well, I look good in the eyes of others. When my family seems orderly, I have the admiration of my peer group. What am I really worshipping? Needing? Looking to be my savior?

Donald McCullough has a great chapter about this in his book, *The Consolations of Imperfection*. He says that the danger in all this is that rather than enjoying our family or marriage, we are actually manipulating family members as substitute saviors. The girl that runs away from the painful family situation into the arms of the bad-boy is needing love. She needs a savior. Or the man who loses interest in his marriage but finds interest in that woman at work. She compliments him. Seems to appreciate him in ways his wife doesn't. Besides the lust, what is at work in the man's heart? He's Adam looking for Eve. He's Adam looking for God. Looking for a new savior. *"And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, 'Deliver me, for you are my god!'"* (Isaiah 44:17)

Your family is not your savior. Idols always disappoint us. Eventually we become disillusioned. Listen to Donald McCullough about disillusionment.

"This is really a gift. Disillusionment demands that we face the truth that other human beings cannot save us from our deepest fears, cannot make us secure in a

dangerous world, cannot make us happy, cannot, in short, be gods for us. This hurts...I mean this literally, for it feels as though we have been abandoned by the deities we have appointed for our salvation. We feel alone and godforsaken.”¹

What Should We Do?

While the Garden of Eden is gone, there is another garden that every family can go to. The Garden of Gethsemane. Sinners are not welcome to the Garden of Eden but all sinners are welcome to Gethsemane. In this garden, the Son of God resolved to take upon himself the guilt and the pain for every family sin. He resolved to provide forgiveness and healing for family sins like bitterness, hate, unkind words, and covenant-breaking. God’s plan for the family is to redeem it by changing each family member from the inside. The heart.

It may or may not be God’s will to change your family, but I guarantee it is his will to change you. To confront your idols. Tear them down. And enthrone Jesus on your heart. God gives divine love and grace to me, the sinner, that I can then extend to the sinners close to me. There isn’t anyone closer to us than our family. What does that look like?

Stretchy love

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

Peter is describing Christian relationships within the church. He says, the most important thing (above all), is that you keep loving one another earnestly. He puts the emphasis on “keep.” Persevere in your loving. Long-term relationships require long-term love.

Peter acknowledges in the last clause what will be the reality of any long-term relationships. *A multitude of sins.* Sinners sin against each other. This doesn’t mean we steal each other’s bank accounts. The most common sins are relational sins. Unforgiveness. Gossip. Anger. Little offenses and slights. To be in relationship with a sinner is to be sinned against; to be disappointed.

So what about family? Since this is the closest place sinners interact, it is where our most sinful selves are seen. Who knows our faults better than our family? Whose faults do we know better than those of our family members? Sometimes those are simply annoying. Often, they are downright offensive.

“Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, how?” Love covers a multitude of sin. The word “covers” here means love at its limit. Agape love will stretch to cover offenses with grace, forgiveness, conflict resolution, overlooking, whatever. Love stretches over the things that would otherwise divide family relationships.

Think of how a rubber band stretches. Your competitive sister dated your husband in high school, but you don’t want her to bring it up or rub it in your face that she broke up with him, but you married him. *Stretch.* The next time you see her, she mentions that you should be disappointed in your child over something he did. And love stretches because she is being obnoxious or annoying. Then the next year there’s the phone call where she said that Mom prefers spending time with her over you. And you have to stretch a little more. Love can cover a multitude of sins.

¹ Donald McCullough, *The Consolations of Imperfection*, p. 40.

Love is not naturally stretchy. So how does it become elastic? A Christian family member stretches love over other family members by realizing that the ultimate stretch was God's stretchy love over me through Jesus. Since he stretched that far for me, I can stretch this little way for her. This is God's love at work in a family as everyone is constantly stretching back and forth toward each other.

Whenever we have had moments of disagreement or whatever in my family, we will say, *stretchy, stretchy*. Feel free to use that at home. A word of caution: that's best said by the one doing the forgiving.

Gospel humility

Jesus tells a parable about a tax collector and a Pharisee that go to the temple.

"The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:11–14)

The Pharisee was self-righteous. He looked to his life as evidence of his right standing. He looked with judgment and condescension at the life of the tax collector.

The tax collector looked to God for his salvation. He saw himself accurately, *"be merciful to me, a sinner."*

In families, there are a lot of Pharisees and not very many tax collectors. Because we see the sins of others so intimately, our sinful nature wants to compare what they did to our perception of self-righteousness. Their tax collecting will always seem far worse than our Phariseeing. Yet Jesus commended the tax collector rather than the Pharisee. Why? The tax collector humbled himself before God.

Here the gospel rightly applied to horizontal relationships helps create healthy families. How? Listen to Paul, *"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst."* (1 Timothy 1:15 NIV)

Paul summarizes the gospel, then gives his own self-assessment, *"of whom I am the worst."* The apostle Paul the worst sinner? How can this be? Is this false humility? C.J. Mahaney helped me on this one. Paul says that he is the worst sinner because he knows his sins more closely and personally than anyone else. In his own eyes, he is the worst sinner because he is the worst sinner he knows.

Try that at your next family reunion. *Let's identify who here is the worst sinner in our family.* That would be fun. All the finger pointing. How would you know the person who really understands the gospel? They will point the finger at themselves. Healing comes to a family when family members are much more concerned with their own sin than everyone else's.

From this flows honest confession and grace. James writes, *"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* (James 4:6 ESV) If you want your family culture to improve, start by acknowledging your own failures to them. Most people will try anything except

humbling themselves. Counseling. Therapy. Marriage weekends. But God gives grace to the humble. Now grace can flow to your family. This is very hard to do. I know it well. Humble yourself before the Lord and your family, and God will give you grace.

Don't Give Up!

It is easy to get to the point where you just think, what's the use? We must continue to do all we can to improve the health and relationships in our families. This includes:

Be a peacemaker

"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." (Romans 12:18)

There will be conflict in families. Sometimes that conflict lingers on. Our calling is that if there is conflict, it doesn't remain unresolved because of us. *"As far as it depends on you."* So our responsibility is to have the spirit of a peacemaker. If a family member wants to remain angry, I can't change that. But I can make sure that my posture toward them is gracious, ready to reconcile, and peacemaking.

Pray for your family members

This isn't a snarky approach where we condescendingly say, *I'm praying for you!* That's just self-righteousness. This is the prayer closet prayers where we don't give up praying for relationships to heal and be healthy. We continue to pray for God's best in that family member's life.

Trust in the sovereignty of God

Scripture has many examples of family problems being used by God. Dysfunctional families include Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. David, Saul, and Jonathon. The apostle brothers James and John. Even Jesus' family had issues with Jesus early on as they didn't understand his mission.

But I think of Joseph and his brothers. There was a huge amount of jealousy among them. Lots of history. The brothers' hatred of Joseph caused them to sell him to Egypt. That's pretty bad, isn't it? Yet God used their dysfunction and Joseph to save both his family and Egypt.

A year later Joseph would make this statement about all the wrong his family did. *"You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."* (Genesis 50:20)

Who knows how God might use you and your crazy family? Loving your crazy family can be an amazing tool of sanctification. God rules over your family and is using the drama in ways we don't often perceive.

*"This is my Father's world.
O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong
God is the ruler yet."²*

² Maltbie D. Babcock, "This is My Father's World." 1901.

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