

Finding Answers to Family Feuds
Genesis 25: 21-34

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To live above with those we love,
Well, that will be glory.
To live below with those we know,
Well, that's another story.

Family feuds. I would like to chat with you a few moments about that today. According to a survey done by Randy Carlson about eight years ago, 91% of American adults long to improve their relationships with their adult siblings. The pains of family life continue to haunt us, often for an entire lifetime.

One of the most compelling stories of the Bible is the struggle between two brothers by the names of Esau and Jacob. These sons of Isaac start jostling each other in their mother's womb and continue to feud and fight for most of their lives. Can we gain from this Genesis story some insight for our relational lives? Perhaps we can, and that is what I pose to do today.

WHY DO FAMILIES FEUD?

In the case of Jacob and Esau, there was a birthright to blame. In biblical times, the birthright belonged to the first born. By a margin of minutes, Esau was the older brother. Oh, what a difference a few minutes made in terms of inheritance. According to their custom and culture, the first born would get a double inheritance. If there were two sons, the inheritance would be split three ways: two parts for Esau, one part for Jacob. Furthermore, the birthright made you the designated head of the family. It meant that simply because of the timing of your birth, you were placed in a position of honor and given an automatic blessing. It also meant that you were the spiritual leader of the clan. You were the shaper of ideas and ideals. You set the standards and the morals for others. A birthright was a blessing to be deeply desired, cherished highly, waited for patiently. In this kind of setting a feud between brothers emerges.

Of course, God does not always play according to our cultural rules. He announces to Rebecca before the two boys are born, that "the older will serve the younger." He inverts the order of things. Wait a minute. That is not the way we do things in this culture. But God, being God, says, *I can do whatever I want and I have decided to do this one a different way.*

Sometimes I wonder if our cultural customs encourage conflicts in our relational lives? What happens when we teach competition at all cost? What kind of world have we created by a scarcity mentality? If I don't grab it there won't be enough for me, so I had better take all I can, as opposed to the notion there is probably

enough for all of us, if we could only learn to share it. What happens when culture teaches us, as the bumper sticker I saw on the back of a car says, “The one who dies with the most toys wins”? What happens when culture says bigger is always better? Should we be surprised when God somehow moves into the midst of all of that and inverts the order? Some people say there is a birthright to blame in this family fight. There is nothing new about it. Families have been fighting over inheritances as long as there have been families.

Some people say that the parents play a part. Indeed they do. Verse 29 says: *Isaac loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob*. “Mom and dad loved you best,” is much more than a funny line from an old Smothers Brothers’ comedy act. For thousands of people, it is the plaintive cry of pain from the wounds of the heart that run all the way through adulthood. There was a triangle set up in this family system. Rebecca sides with Jacob, Isaac sides with Esau. Why don’t the two adults ever talk to one another? The good thing about the Bible is it just tells it like it is.

Tom Watson Jr., who for many years was the CEO of IBM writes, *I always felt like the black sheep in my family. My brother lived up to what my Dad wanted. I never did. He graduated from Yale, played ball, related to people with the greatest of charm and ease. I had none of those social skills. I never felt I measured up nor found the approval of my father.*

Roberta Bondi, a professor at Emory, has written a book, Healing the Wounds of the Heart. In it she talks about the rejection she felt when her father divorced her mother. *I remember deciding then that if my father did not want the child I was, neither did I. As an adult, I continued to accept the twelve-year old interpretation of divorce, as well as the scorn and hatred of myself for years and years.* What parents think play a gigantic role in what children do and how they feel for a lifetime. Parents play a part.

Of course, the siblings themselves wind up in a fight. My friend, Jim Harnish, writes about his abiding rivalry with his twin brother, Jack. *We shared all the intimacy of two cats in a burlap bag, says Jim. The evidence of our struggle of wills was left on the bottom panels of our bedroom doors where we locked each other out and tried to kick each other’s door in.*

Parents may set the stage, but it is the boys themselves who close the deal, scheming, tricking, blaming, charging, wanting it now.

Esau said, “I’m feeling faint.”
“Aw” said Jacob, “no you ain’t.”
“Poppa’s blessing,” Esau cried,
“Is mine by rights, but I’ll have died
Of hunger first. For pity’s sake-
My birthright for your lentils, Jake.”
“Your birthright?” Jacob murmured. “Sold!”

Dig in before the stuff gets cold.”

That day a deal was made that would hurt two boys as long as they lived. Feuds have a way of going on and on and on. From generation to generation they continue.

Jacob becomes the father of Israel and Esau becomes the father of the Edomites. Two-hundred and seventy years later, Moses is leading the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. They set up camp in a place called Kadesh. Moses sends ambassadors to talk to the King of Edom, asking permission to pass through their territory (Numbers 20:16). Edom refused to give them permission to pass through the territory. The pain of hate and deceit run deep and last long. The sins of the fathers impact descendents from generation to generation.

SO, WHAT CAN WE DO?

If feuds are real, what can we do? I want to suggest four things. In the first place, we can receive God’s mercy. As the old spiritual says,
It’s me, it’s me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.
Not my brother, not my sister, but it’s me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.

Even the New Testament writers kept going back to the story. In Romans 9, when Paul was trying to articulate the plan of salvation, by grace and grace alone, he picks up this story from the Old Testament. He has God saying in verse 15: *I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and compassion on whom I have compassion.* Therefore, reasons Paul, our salvation does not depend on our desire or effort, but on God’s mercy. Furthermore, Paul reasons that, if God can take a heel like Jacob and make him the father of Israel, he ought to be able to do something good with the sorts and likes of you and me. I say to you today, no matter how you got to where you are, or how badly you hurt, or how embarrassed you may be, or how drained of hope you may feel, there is a ceaseless stream of God’s mercy flowing for you. By the waters of baptism our sins are washed away. At the fount of the Divine blessing, there is living water day after day after day. What can we do? We can accept God’s mercy and grace. What can we do? We can take responsibility for ourselves. The writer of Hebrews had something to say about this old story. In chapter 12, the writer says, “Don’t be godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance right as the oldest son.”

Esau did not know the difference between an inconvenience and a problem. Do you? Starving to death? Get a life, Big Red. You haven’t even missed a meal yet and you say you are starving. You just want what you want and you want it now and you will have it no matter the price tag.

Robert Fulghum tells the story about turning loose in a tirade on the manager of a resort hotel after a week of accumulated frustration in the place. He says, “When I finished my angry remarks, the manager of the place said to me, ‘Listen, Fulghum, you think you know everything, but there is something you failed to

learn in kindergarten. You don't know the difference between a problem and an inconvenience. If you break your neck, have nothing to eat, or find yourself trapped in a fire, that is a problem. Everything else is an inconvenience. Learn that and you will live longer." So I ask you today, what are you doing with what is? What can we do? We can accept God's mercy and grace. It is all grace my friends, it is all grace. What can we do? We can take responsibility for ourselves.

What can we do? We can form healthy family systems. Ben Stein writes in *The Wall Street Journal*, "The things that concern me most are no longer down-sizing, Dow Jones, trade balance, or movie stars. What I am most interested in is getting my eight-year old son Tommy lovingly to bed in time to wake up refreshed the next morning. What I am really worried about is to make sure I am firm enough with him to give him a sense of boundaries without being so strict that I scare him to death. What I am praying to God for is that somehow I will learn to spend as much time as possible with him without making him think I am his slave. I cannot control the political platform of presidents, but I do have a little control over what Tommy remembers of me and what a father is supposed to be. At night when I watch the news, I realize that what I say to Tommy is more important than what I have done any place else."

You can decide today to stop the competition game at your house. You can decide today to stop comparing one sibling to another and playing favorites with your children. You can decide today to stop trying to be perfectly equal, because children do not need to be treated equally, they need to be treated uniquely. You can decide today to form your family into a team where one is for all and all is for one, where you win and lose together. You can make that choice. Your children and grandchildren will bless you for it.

There is one other thing you can do, you can stop the cycle of hate. In a *Peanuts* cartoon, Lucy is chasing Charlie Brown. "I'll catch you," shouts Lucy "and when I do I'm going to knock your block off." Suddenly Charlie screeches to a halt. He turns to Lucy and says, "Wait a minute Lucy, if you and I as relatively small children, with relatively small problems, can't sit down and talk through our problems in a mature way, how can we expect the nations of the world to get along?" With that, Lucy slugs him. "I had to hit him quick," says Lucy, "he was starting to make sense." So it is no wonder that Mother Theresa, the lover of the least, when asked what we can do to promote world peace, said, "Go home and love your family."

Family feuds. We may not be able to avoid them. But by the grace of God we can live through them and learn from them, and maybe, for the sake of future generations, overcome them. So, I have taken that old jingle and re-written it. It goes something like this:

If we plan to live above with those we love
Well, here's the rest of the story.
We must live below with those we know

Empowered by God's grace and glory.

Amen

