

June 22, 2014

Genesis 7:1-4

“The Perfect Family”

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I grew up in a family of four boys. Would you believe me if I told you that we were at all times angelic, perfectly-behaved sons and siblings? Would you believe me if I told you that the Puls family of Fraser, Michigan won the “Perfect Family of the Year” award year after year? Not even close!

None of our families are perfect, are they? Not mine. Not yours ...

And when I read my Bible, I don't find any perfect families there. The Old Testament is full of crazy, conflicted families. Even Jesus' family, in the New Testament Gospels, had its share of issues and tensions.

We heard earlier part of the story of Joseph and his family, from the Bible. Joseph had eleven brothers, but his father loved him the most, and foolishly showed strong favoritism to Joseph. His brothers resented their father's attitude, and they hated Joseph for it. Joseph was conceited and snarky with his siblings; and, eventually, they beat him up, tossed him in a well, sold him to some slave traffickers, and convinced their father that brother Joseph had been killed by wild animals. So this Bible family didn't quite win the “Perfect Family of the Year” award, either.

We've been talking this month about keeping Christ at the center of our families. It's one thing to talk about it here in church. It's quite another thing to be able to even think about Jesus when you're in the middle of a fight with your spouse, when your kids are ruining another family dinner, when your parents are being completely unfair, when your brother or

sister is screaming in your face. Where is Christ, in these moments of our family lives?

I remember, several years ago, my wife and I eating dinner at the house of some friends. We'd socialized with this couple before, and always enjoyed their company. But this night there was a tension, thick, between them. The wife made a couple of cutting remarks toward the husband. Then he sent a few shots across her bow. It got worse and worse. I remember Colleen and I sitting there, grossly uncomfortable, as the two of them picked each other apart. If you've ever been caught like that in the middle of someone else's conflict, you know how awkward that can be. It wasn't a complete shock, then, just a few weeks later, when we heard that our friends had separated. They soon divorced, and they're still duking it out.

What if it had been Jesus, though, sitting at that dinner table, instead of my wife and me? What would he have said to them? How might he have helped that couple? How would just the presence of Jesus have made a difference, changed the tone, affected the outcome for that husband and wife?

Even the Christ-centered family is going to have some conflicts. But I'd suggest to you today that Jesus really can help you and your family when you're squabbling, when you're mad at each other, when you're at one another's throats. I'm not saying that Jesus is going to come in and wave a magic wand. He's not going to suddenly solve all the conflicts for you. But our Lord really can help you and your family. I said this to you a couple of weeks ago, and I'll say it again today -- the more you allow him to play a role in your family, the more he can help, the more he will bless your family. And that's true even when our families are in conflict.

Let's talk today about one specific way that Jesus can help. Here is a tool that Christians like us all need to keep in our family's tool belt. This is a power tool for us to use in troubled times. Jesus offers us today the transformative power of **sacrifice**.

Now, when you read Jesus' story in the Scriptures, and when you come to know him on a personal level, you can't help learning about sacrifice. Jesus was all about sacrifice. The Lord gave up his life on the cross for our sins, and that was the ultimate sacrifice. But Jesus was constantly sacrificing, in his relationships with others. Jesus, when others sinned against him, gave up his right to be angry. Jesus, when his friends let him down, could have lost his patience with them and lashed out, but he didn't. He set that prerogative aside. He sacrificed it. Jesus, when people did him wrong, gave up his desire to get even, and to pay back.

That's hard to do, isn't it? Sacrifice like that goes against our human nature. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth -- that's more our style. But when Jesus is more and more at the center of your family life, when Jesus' love is changing your heart, and shaping your character, he may just call you, once in a while, to sacrifice like that yourself. There may be a time in your family life this week when Jesus is whispering in your ear, "Give up your right to hurt that person who's hurt you." Your human nature is shouting in the other ear, "Go ahead, get back at that person! Insult him if he insults you!" But Jesus calls us to a different way. Jesus shows us a different way. And Jesus wants our family conflicts to be transformed, to be resolved, in a different way.

So try using that tool of sacrifice, when you're having a conflict in your family. And I know, this is very hard to do. But try letting go of your desire to get even this time. Don't say the things you normally say, when you're having a

conflict. Make a sincere effort this week, in your family, to follow Christ's example of sacrifice. You may see some of your arguments softened, your resentment diminished, your anger transformed.

Sacrifice doesn't mean you don't stand up for yourself, and you let others walk all over you. Sacrifice does mean, though, willingly putting the needs of others before your own. It means doing whatever it takes to make your family healthy and strong, to keep your marriage and your parent-child relationships and all your family relationships filled with and transformed by Christ-like love.

Sacrifice is a powerful tool. Giving up what we're entitled to? Letting go of our right to respond in kind? Caring more about forgiveness and healing in our families than about keeping score and being right? These are Christ-like actions, especially in times of conflict. And they just may begin to strengthen and transform our Christ-centered families.

None of our families will likely ever win that elusive "Perfect Family of the Year" award. But let's turn to our perfect God, and pray for our families. Let's admit our shortcomings, and seek his forgiveness. And may Christ's perfect sacrifice empower you, and your family, in your times of conflict. Amen.