

## Facing Giants | Family Dynamics

May 2, 2021 | Matthew McNutt

[open with title slide on screen] Facing Giants. Today is the first of six sermons where we will try to face down some giants together. We aren't talking about Goliath. No, we're looking at the giants that can loom in our lives yet we often avoid talking about. Fear. Anxiety. Depression. Grief. Addiction. Mental Illness. Giants that many of us have been impacted by or have loved ones struggling with.

[family dynamics slide] Today, I'm going to dive into the topic of family dynamics. Which is a big one. It's a big one to God as well; Proverbs 6 lists seven things the Lord detests, culminating in a word to families:

Proverbs 6:16, 19b (NLT) There are six things the Lord hates—no, seven things he detests ... a person who sows discord in a family.

Many of us have something in common; a broken family relationship, a family in discord. Maybe a sibling, a parent, a cousin, a spouse, the list goes on. But how do I pursue unity with someone who has been verbally abusive, physically abusive, sexually abusive, manipulative, has betrayed me, has robbed me, who has put my – or other parts of my family's safety at risk? Am I really supposed to just forgive them and pursue peace and unity? Is there a point where God allows cutting someone off?

This is a difficult message; the reality is that my family story is messy.

**This is my family.** My family of origin, that is. Sometime in the late 80's. I'm the tall kid in the back. **I come from a family of extremes.**

A large chunk of my life was on the west coast, close to my mother's family. Every year my Great Grandparents would host a Christmas eve party in their tiny house. They had eight kids, who in turn had a bunch of kids, who in turn had my generation ... there were a lot of us jammed in there. Great-Grandma hung a stocking for each one of us on her mantle, with each generation's stockings getting smaller and smaller. Great-Grandpa had a piano, and I kid you not, we would all sit on the floor around the tree in the living room ... and kitchen and dining room and sing Christmas carols while he played on the piano. **It was straight out of a Hallmark Christmas movie.**

Then we moved to the east coast, close to my dad's family, which would also get together every year. My dad has seven sisters. You would never guess it, knowing me, but those parties were loud. And usually ended in drunken screaming matches, sometimes fights, an occasional ER trip to get stitches – I'm not exaggerating – and one even ended up triggering a lawsuit between siblings. **More of a Hans Gruber at Nakatomi Tower than a Hallmark movie.**

I generally laugh about that. It's just wild. I don't laugh about my parents and siblings. Short of a miracle, I don't think you would ever get the six of us in a photo together again. My dad is a narcissistic, controlling, manipulative, abusive man. He made the divorce between my mom and him one of the ugliest the lawyers had ever worked on and it dragged for years. He's robbed my siblings and I of tens of thousands of dollars, lied about all of us, sabotaged us, and that's small compared to what he put my mother through.

So what do we do as Christians? People who are called to be more and more like Christ? The temptation is to walk away, to ignore the family conflict, to cut off the offender, to move on – but that has ramifications. That hurt doesn't go away; it may be buried for a while, but it resurfaces. **[THE PAST IMPACTS OUR PRESENT]** Andy Stanley frequently talks about how our past relationships, our past conflicts, they don't stay in the past – they reach forward and impact our present, our current relationships. Ignore past family hurt won't stay in the past, it will – sometimes at the most unexpected times – impact our present family relationships. That's a practical reality that should drive us to push into, rather than away from, the challenge of dealing with our family dynamics.

More significantly, though, there is a spiritual reality that is an even greater call to action:

*2 Corinthians 5:17-20 (NIV) <sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come [has become a new person]: The old has gone, the new is here! <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup> that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*

We are Christ's ambassadors; God is represented to the world around us, to our families, directly through us. **"As though God were making his appeal through us."** That's a powerful and convicting statement, isn't it?

## **1. MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION**

**[2 Cor 5:18 slide]** As Christians, we are given the ministry of reconciliation. If you remember two things from today, this is the first one. It's not an optional part of our faith. This is the task He has given each one of us.

I love how the Message version of the Bible paraphrases part of this passage:

***God has given us the task of telling everyone what he is doing. We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their***

***differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them. We're speaking for Christ himself now.***

God's goals are so much bigger than ours. We get so wrapped up in the now, but God is working towards eternity.

***Ephesians 4:31-32 (NIV) <sup>31</sup> Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.***

In Genesis 33 there is a fascinating moment recorded in scripture. It's the culmination of decades of family fighting. Maybe you're familiar with the story of these two brothers. Jacob manipulated Esau out of his birthright for a bowl of soup. Then, he manipulated their father into giving him the blessing meant for Esau as well. Esau, after being manipulated, played, and robbed of his future, swore he would kill Jacob once their father died. So Jacob fled. For 20 years he stayed away, until finally, he had a literal come to God moment and realized he needed to go back and repent to his brother. When they finally met, Esau showed up with 400 men, essentially an army. To Jacob, it didn't look good. And anyone at the time would have said Esau was justified. But as Jacob humbled himself and approached Esau, something unexpected happened:

***Genesis 33:4 (NIV) But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.***

Esau forgave him. Unexpectedly. Shockingly.

In the midst of all that, one of Jacob's many sons was mentioned, almost off-hand: Joseph. Joseph witnessed first-hand Esau's incredible forgiveness of his brother. Joseph would grow up to have his ten older brothers turn on him, attack him, sell him into slavery, where he would be falsely accused of rape and be forgotten in prison for more than a decade. Eventually, God moved and Joseph was not only released, he became one of the most powerful men in Egypt, when decades after they betrayed him, his brothers stood before him, the man they had once brutally betrayed and now feared would execute them, only to be shocked as he responded as his uncle once had.

***Genesis 50:19-20 (NIV) <sup>19</sup> Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?" <sup>20</sup> You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.***

Our children learn reconciliation from us, don't they? I don't want my sons to end up a fragmented, broken family some day – if that's what I want, don't I need to model it?

When God calls us to get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, malice, to be kind and compassionate, to forgive just as He forgave us, that starts at home.

When I refuse to forgive my father, I am essentially saying my bar for forgiveness, the standard to which people need to measure up to, is higher than God's.

**God never stops pursuing us.** There is nothing we can do where He washes His hands of us. As much as we may cut off contact with Him, He does not stop reaching to us. When do we finally get to give up on family? How many times do I have to forgive? Seven? I love how **Andy Stanley** puts it: **You can give up when your heavenly Father gives up on pursuing a relationship with you.**

In other words, in most cases we need to keep trying. Periodically reaching out, inviting them to the family get togethers, sending messages. Avoiding the excuse, "well I tried, but they didn't respond, so the ball is in their court now." Don't let their inaction be your excuse. We are called to a ministry of reconciliation, and even in the messiness of families God can work miracles.

**Having said that, there are scenarios that require boundaries, even separation.**

In Matthew 10:16, Jesus is giving His disciples instructions when He says the following:

**Matthew 10:16 (NIV) "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."**

The passage has a wide perspective, including family division.<sup>1</sup> Jesus uses several fascinating metaphors. As believers, we are often described as sheep in the scripture, which conveys a certain amount of vulnerability that many of us may not be too comfortable with when we actually think about it.

But what gets really fascinating to me is this second sentence. "Shrewd as snakes." "Innocent as doves." What does that mean?

Christ was pointing out two things; first, that snakes have an instinct for self-preservation.<sup>2</sup> They get out of the way when threatened. The second is that doves, on the other hand, are harmless. **We need the cunning of snakes without the venom.** Our efforts should not be focused on harming others or lashing back, but we should have an instinct for self-preservation. In family dynamics, that looks like boundaries.

## **2. A TIME FOR BOUNDARIES**

We are called to a ministry of reconciliation. But there is also a time for boundaries.

My dad is narcissistic. He has to have the power over those around him, any question – even innocent ones – is perceived a threat. I vividly remember as a ten-year-old hiding in the back yard, desperately wondering why my mom wouldn't leave him. His

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<sup>1</sup> Richard T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 388.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 390.

rages were and are terrifying. When Heather and I got married, it was bizarre to her to hear the things I grew up thinking were normal. Hidden recorders, stealing from us, going through our mail, terrifying threats. Even as an adult he would read our private files when he had access and get the post office to give him our mail so he could go through it. Those are the tip of the iceberg, but here's the key: my dad is not safe.

In their book "Boundaries," Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend talk about the danger of losing control of your life, your property,<sup>3</sup> or the red flag of one relationship negatively impacts your other relationships<sup>4</sup> – that that warrants creating boundaries.

For Heather and I, we realized that we had to push back on these intrusions. As we tried to set boundaries, he reacted. It was bad. We tried to find reconciliation. Our church leadership was involved. We worked with other pastors, counselors, the Peace Makers organization, interventionists, we let my dad choose each of them to keep him at the table. The same thing happened over and over; within a couple sessions it would become apparent that they saw things in my dad he needed to address and work on, at which point he would refuse to proceed because clearly they didn't know anything and we needed to start over with someone who actually knew what they were doing. Over and over.

More significantly, we realized he wasn't safe to be alone with our young children. The way he would talk about Heather and I to them was a big one, but there were other concerns as well. He would say we cut him off from us and our children, but the reality is that we just said we need to be around.

It's sad. These kinds of things have played out with my siblings as well. He isn't talking to most of us. He essentially doesn't know our kids. We have expressed willingness to pursue reconciliation over the years, but to date it has been rejected.

Here's the thing, there is no way to have all the answers to complex family dynamics in one 30 minute sermon. There just isn't. I have spent more time with counselors than I can remember processing the family dynamics I grew up with. At every step of the way when Heather and I were setting boundaries – and standing by them, as painful as has been at times, we did not do so in a vacuum. Whether it was the elders at our former church, or in recent years, the pastoral staff here, we have had other trusted voices. These voices were key; they help us to respond instead of react. As the authors put it in *Boundaries*, "When you are reacting, they are in control. When you respond, you are."<sup>5</sup>

## **Conclusion:**

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 135.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 138.

When it comes to our families, we are all called to a **ministry of reconciliation**. We must be like God and relentlessly pursue reconciliation, even if our pursuit is rebuffed. We must forgive those who have offended or hurt us; part of forgiveness is releasing yourself of the hold that anger or hurt or pain has on you, releasing them of what they owe you – whether it's something practical, an apology, or even the desire for revenge.

There may be a **need for boundaries**. It may be simple boundaries. It may be a boundary that requires cutting someone off – because of abuse, whether physical or sexual, because of verbal abuse, because they put you in danger financially, physically, spiritually. If you are a victim of some sort of assault, you worry about the safety of yourself, your family. Boundaries need to be formed.

- Which require **forgiveness**. We are called to forgive. The offender doesn't get to try and dictate the timeline, or throw verses at you compelling forgiveness. But in your own time, through prayer, through Godly counsel, getting to a place of forgiveness is critical for your own peace, to be that dove in Matthew 10:16.
- Boundaries require **trusted voices** to speak into them. You should not create them in a vacuum. You should not do it because you heard me preach a sermon. Remember the part where this is way too complex an issue to be solved in one message? You need to seek out perspective from trusted Christian leaders, counselors, pastors, our shepherds.
- And you need to **hold fast** to your boundaries. Continue to reevaluate them, but hold fast against someone guilt-tripping or manipulating you. This is where these other trusted voices continue to be so vital in giving affirmation and support.

If you don't know where to start, reach out to us; we know of great Christian counselors in the area – it is strength to reach out to someone who has the tools you need to work through it.

***1 Corinthians 10:31 (NIV) So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.***

Let us be followers of Christ who do everything for the glory of God, including how we handle our family dynamics.

Pastor Nate recorded two interviews with counselors around the topic of families that we'll be posting later this week; the first is with Grant Hasty from Renewed Life Christian Counseling Center, the second is with Karen Fitchett from the Peace Makers.

**Pray**

**Communion / warning in 1 Corinthians 11**