

FAMILY STRONG:

When Brothers and Sisters Quarrel

Genesis 33:1-11

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John Claypool told the story of twin brothers who grew up as very close friends. They inherited the family business and ran the store successfully. One morning a customer came in and made a small cash purchase. The brother laid the cash on the counter and walked the customer to the door. Later, he remembered what had happened and went back to put the cash away. It was gone. He asked his twin if he had put it in the cash register. No. And it all could have ended there, because it was just a small amount of money. But the brother went back and asked again, "Are you *sure* you didn't take that money? I didn't see anyone else in the store at the time." Well, that began an ugly, painful series of charges and counter-charges. Trust was broken. The feud went on for twenty years and the brothers quarreled so badly that they dissolved the partnership and created two stores, right next to one another. The community was drawn into the conflict, forced to choose which store to patronize.

Then one day a well-dressed stranger walked in to one of the stores. He told the first brother his story. "About twenty years ago, I was down on my luck. I had no job and hadn't eaten in three days. I slipped into your store unnoticed and when I saw some cash lying on the counter, I took it and quietly left. I'm here to make amends." The stranger was surprised to see the brother begin to shake and weep. The brother said, "Would you go next door and tell this same story to the owner?" He did and this time there were two old men, who looked remarkably alike, weeping. [John Claypool, *The Preaching Event*, p. 37ff].

It would be difficult to exaggerate the mess that Jacob has made of family relationships. He has cheated his twin brother Esau every step of the way. He has lied, been selfish and conniving. He has cheated and burned bridges of trust. Now, when the day of reckoning arrives, bows before Esau seven times and prepares to give him elaborate gifts (32:13-15). "But," Gen. 33:4 says, "But..." An important word. Jacob was expecting revenge and he got grace. Listen to 33:4. The wording will be borrowed later by Jesus in Luke 15, the story of the Prodigal Son. "Embraced...kissed...wept..." Esau is my candidate for the unsung hero of the First Testament. Who had more of a right to be angry? To be hurt? To want revenge?

Something in Esau had changed since his vow to kill Jacob (Gen. 27:41). Something had also changed in Jacob, during that all-night wrestling match with the angel (Gen. 32:24). God works in our hearts slowly, doesn't He? But there is transformation, the most exciting part of the believer's life! You see, two men were healed that day. The one who was forgiven and the one to forgive. My New Testament professor at seminary, Dr. Coble, used to say, "Forgiving is not forgetting; it is refusing to allow the wrong shape our future relationship." To our youth graduating this week, remember this. You can get an A in calculus and flunk relationships. You

can get an A in church activities and flunk forgiveness. God in Christ is always inviting us to grow in the school of love and forgiveness.

Poor Jacob. He was having trouble with grace. He was always trying to buy and earn forgiveness, love and approval. It was hard for him to believe that God or anyone else could love him as he was. We all struggle with grace, don't we? We think if we can pay for our salvation, we will stay in control and our ego will remain intact. We did it. But the message of the Cross is that we cannot earn it. We are sinners in need of grace. At the Cross, God's grace is poured out.

When we believe we are on a works-salvation basis with God and then transfer that to other relationships, those relationships can deteriorate quickly. A married couple who start keeping score regarding hurts. Friends, parents, siblings, fellow church members, trying to make others earn our love, when all the time, God does not deal with us this way. That's why these verses from Ephesians are so important: "Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you. Watch what God does, and then you do it...Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant" (Ephesians 4:32--5:2).

Note what Jacob says to Esau in v. 10: to see you is to see the face of God, because of the favor (grace) you have bestowed. Wow. There it is again. Grace.

Several years ago, in the devotional guide, "The Upper Room," Tom told the moving story of his own journey to forgiveness and grace. He and his wife had trusted some close friends with their meager life savings in an investment venture. He was betrayed, lost everything, including his job. Tom's anger grew with each new day. Month after month, as he struggled to stay afloat. His rage brought on ulcers. One day his pastor said, "Tom, it's as if you drank a bottle of poison and expected the other person to die. Forgive them. Do it for yourself, not them." Through lots of work, time and prayer, God's grace broke through. Tom knew he was healed when he ran into the man who had hurt him the most. Fear shone in the man's eyes, but Tom said, "Relax. I'm not going to hurt you. I forgive you." The man wept and asked Tom's forgiveness. They sobbed and embraced. Tom said, like Esau and Jacob, they both saw the face of God that afternoon.