

“Families Are Messy”
Sermon Series on *The Life of David* #11
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(2 Sam. 15:1-12)

Introduction.

Families are messy, aren't they? I know, because the family I grew up in was a little messy itself. From the outside we looked like “Leave it to Beaver” or “Ozzie and Harriett” – mom and dad, three sons, a couple of dogs in a nice neighborhood in midtown Atlanta. We were a typical American family growing up in the 1950s and 60s. On the screens you'll see a picture of my family at Christmas in 1953. I'm the baby in my mother's arms. Look at how much hair I had back then!

On the outside we looked like an all American family, and in many ways we were. But on the inside the reality was a little different, and there was a good bit of dysfunction in my family of origin. Maybe your family had some dysfunction, too. There is much about my family that was absolutely wonderful, and I'm so very grateful for the family I grew up in. But as I said, families are messy. Mine sure was.

Most of us grow up in a mixed bag of family relationships. Some parts of it are wonderful, but other parts of it create baggage we end up having to carry with us into adulthood. I think it's important to sort through that baggage and capitalize on the good while unpacking the bad.

Messy families are nothing new, and families have been messy since the beginning of time. It's the result of the Fall when our first parents made some bad choices, and we've been dealing with the consequences ever since. This morning we read of the messy family of King David, and it's a case study on how the sins of a parent can be visited on the children.

Today, in particular, I want us to take a look at David and his relationship with his son Absalom. As we study their relationship and the brokenness of their lives, I think there's a great deal we can learn about how to live the Christian life and how to build a Christian family in the messiness of the world today. Let's take a closer look.

I. The Failure of a Father.

There is an entire backstory to this passage in 2 Samuel 15, and the sad tale runs all the way from chapters 13-18 of this book in the OT. I encourage you to read the whole story if you're interested to learn more about the context in which all this

takes place, but I'll give you the basic overview now of what has led to this moment.

The problems David had with regard to his son Absalom can be traced back to his failure as man and his failure as a parent earlier in his life. Everything was going well for David and his leadership of the nation of Israel, and the Bible says he was a man after God's own heart. But then his life went off the rails in the worst way, and through a series of very poor decisions he wrecked not only his own life but also the life of his family.

The first failure involved his sin with Bathsheba. From the excellent sermon Heather preached a few weeks ago, you'll recall that when David should have been out leading his troops in battle as king of Israel, he remained behind in Jerusalem. And from the roof top of his palace he saw Bathsheba bathing, cleansing herself. His lust led to an abuse of his power which then resulted in an affair, an unwanted pregnancy, and a conspiracy to kill Bathsheba's husband which he then tried to cover up.

In this sad episode in David's life, he committed one sin after another, and as a result he not only lost the respect of his family and his army, but also the moral authority to lead and govern his nation. In 2 Samuel 12, the prophet Nathan confronted David and he pronounced judgment on the king. He said, "...*The sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own. Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you*" (12:9-11). This prophesy was fulfilled in the rebellion and betrayal of Absalom we read about today.

But there is more to the backstory of the tension in their relationship. Several years before, David's oldest son Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar, and the Bible says that while David was furious about what Amnon did, he nevertheless didn't do anything about it. Perhaps he was haunted by his own sin with Bathsheba, and maybe all of this reminded him of how he personally failed before. Maybe he thought, "How can I hold Amnon accountable when I did a very similar thing?" Tamar was Absalom's sister, and it infuriated him that his father looked the other way and allowed this great injustice to go unchecked in the family.

Since David appeared to gloss over and excuse what Amnon had done, Absalom decided to take matters into his own hands. Two years later, he developed a plan to invite David and the whole family to come to his home for a party, and he insisted that David ensure that Amnon attend. David declined to attend the party himself, but he made sure Amnon was there along with all of his other sons. Then, just when Amnon's spirits were high from all the wine and the revelry of the party, Absalom ordered his men to strike Amnon down and kill him. And they did.

Absalom fled and went to live with his maternal grandfather Ammihud who was the king of Geshur, and he stayed there in exile for three years. David grieved the death of his son Amnon and he grieved the banishment of Absalom. But again, he didn't do anything to bring about justice or hold anyone accountable. He was a co-dependent parent, and he allowed one sin after another to go unchecked in his family.

Eventually, Absalom was able to return to Jerusalem with the help of Joab, one of David's generals. But David refused to see his son when he returned, or even to welcome him back. And the king sent his son to live in another house in the city. For two more years David refused to see Absalom. Then the young man leveraged his relationship with Joab, and he persuaded the general to advocate to the king on his behalf. Joab did, and the king sent for his son and they made peace with each other, but only at a minimal level.

What a mess! A daughter is raped, a son is murdered, and another son is banished. And it all can be traced back to the failure of the father. David's sin is repeated by his children, and as Mike Horne said a couple of weeks ago, sin splatters. Men, I want to remind those of you who are fathers that God expects you to set a moral and spiritual example for your children. And whenever you fail to live a life that is pleasing to God, don't be surprised when it ends up having consequences for your whole family, and especially your children. What is done in secret will eventually see the light of day, and it will impact those you love the most and who are closest to you in the worst way. The stakes are high when you're raising a child, and God calls us each of us to try and be our best especially in our own homes. Sadly, all too often it's the very place we are at our worst.

II. The Betrayal of a Son.

The Bible tells us that Absalom was extremely handsome, and he was especially known for his awesome hair. (That's not something I can relate to, but apparently he had it going for him!) Absalom was good looking, and he was vain. He reminds you a little bit of the character Gaston in *The Beauty and the Beast*. We also gather from this passage that he was quite charming. As he settled back into life in Jerusalem, it wasn't long before he grew restless with ambition, and treachery began to stir in his heart. He wanted to become the king himself, and he began to plan how he could overthrow his father and take the throne.

Absalom had manipulated his way back into the king's court, but he was far from satisfied and set out to undermine the authority of his father by building up his own prestige. He got himself a chariot (a novelty for the day), and he had 50 men run ahead of him as he drove around Jerusalem. He had a flair for publicity, he was into building his image, and he wanted people to know who he was.

Absalom was also a politician. He would rise early in the morning and position

himself strategically close to the city gate. Whenever a stranger came to register a grievance with the king, he was ready to listen and eager to right the wrongs of the country. As he ingratiated himself to the people, he planted doubts in their minds about his father, and he suggested they would perhaps be better served if he was in charge.

After doing this sort of thing for four years, the Bible tells us that he “*stole the hearts of the people of Israel.*” The time had come to make his move, and Absalom went to the town of Hebron to stage a *coup de ta*. Hebron was the place where David himself had begun his reign as king, and it’s no accident that Absalom selected this city to do the very same thing. He sent secret messengers to the tribes of Israel to be ready to announce his reign when a signal was sent throughout the land. And he ensured support by having 200 of David’s leading officials accompany him to Hebron.

The plan worked, and when Absalom announced that he was the new king, David and the rest of his family and all of the other officials in his court had to flee the city of Jerusalem and escape with their lives. And once again David was a refugee. Meanwhile, Absalom solidified his reign, and he sought to make a mockery of his father. He slept with all of David’s concubines who stayed behind to take care of the palace, and he did so in broad daylight for everyone to see. What David had done in secret with Bathsheba Absalom did in public.

A civil war ensued, and David mustered an army that remained loyal to him. The army of David clashed with the army of Absalom in the forest of Ephraim, and David’s men prevailed. Twenty-thousand soldiers died that day, and the battle spread out over the whole countryside. Absalom was also killed, and the revolt ended. Even though David was restored to his throne, he wept over the death of his son and he wished that he had been the one who had died. The family was torn apart, and it would never be the same again. What a tragedy.

III. The Redemption of a Savior.

2 Samuel leaves us longing for a king who will exercise justice without hypocrisy, a king who has the moral authority to lead and govern because of the righteousness of his life. It makes us wish we could have a leader (and even perhaps a parent) we can respect and who is selfless in their love and service. What it points to is just how badly we all need Jesus.

But Jesus the Savior who is also the King does more than just execute justice. He also covers our shame. Earlier in the story, Tamar asks before her rape, “Where could I get rid of my disgrace?” The answer is, “At the cross.” Jesus puts right both the wrong we have done and the wrong that has been done to us, and He clothes us not only with His own righteousness and makes us children of God; He also covers our shame. That’s the only hope you and I have in the messiness of

our families.

What do you do when your family is messy? Is there any hope? I think there is, and the key is to look to Jesus to be the healer of your heart in the midst of all the brokenness you experience in your family and to ask Him to show you what to do. You see, Christ can redeem everything that happens in our lives, even the problems we experience in our family. He has the ability to bring transformation and healing, and He can also help us break the unhealthy cycle of one generation to another. And as Tim shared with us last week, good things can come out of messy families. Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise God made to David that a member of his family would be the Messiah.

There are five things I've found helpful you can do when your family is messy. I want to share them with you for your consideration. *First*, own the ways you have contributed to the problems in your family and repent of how you've hurt someone or failed to do the right thing. *Second*, hold family members accountable when they mess up. Co-dependency isn't really love. It's enabling bad behavior that needs to be checked, and no one is helped whenever we fail to hold someone accountable or speak the truth in love.

Third, be willing to ask for forgiveness and say, "I'm sorry," whenever you mess up. And also be willing to forgive when it's asked for. Now, forgiveness doesn't always remove the consequences of our sin, and sometimes we still have to deal with the results of what we've done wrong. But it does allow us to start over and to begin anew in a broken relationship.

Fourth, be committed to breaking the cycle of unhealth in your family. Don't repeat the same mistakes your parents and your grandparents made when you were growing up. That will take some work, because the imprint of the patterns of our families of origin is very strong, and it takes the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to do it. But it can be done. I'll say more about that in a moment.

Finally, look to Jesus as your example and your guide, and ask Him for His help to live in a new way. Miracles can happen, and God isn't finished writing your story. You can begin a new chapter, and it can be different from the past.

God is in the business of redemption and transformation. If He has the power to overcome sin and death through the resurrection of Jesus, then He can change your life and He can change your family too. In the last verse of the last book of the OT, the prophet Malachi predicted that when the Messiah came He would "turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Mal. 4:6). Christ can do that in your home. I really believe that. No matter how messy your family may be, God can bring healing and redemption.

What does this look like in real life? I'll give you an example. When my oldest son Nate was in preschool, I read a book about breaking the cycle of generational sin and writing a new story with your own family, and I thought about the ways I

didn't want to make the same mistakes my father made when I was growing up. You see, while my dad was a great man in many ways, as a father he was aloof and distant. I knew that he loved me, but it wasn't in the ways I needed to be loved, and it was usually on his terms and his turf. He rarely entered my world, and when he did it was only when it was convenient for him. So when I read this book God impressed on me that I needed to be different as a dad, and I was supposed to try and love my kids on their terms and their turf.

One day I scheduled a lunch date with Nate, and when we got into the car I asked him where he wanted to go for lunch. Enthusiastically he said, "McDonalds!" Well, I don't much care for the food at McDonalds, so I suggested we go to an upscale burger place I liked which had awesome burgers and fries. But Nate insisted he wanted to go to McDonalds. Then I kind of bullied him into agreeing to go to the place I wanted to go, and eventually he resigned himself with a sigh.

I was driving down the street to go to my upscale burger place when the Holy Spirit impressed upon me, "Love your kids on their terms and their turf." I pulled into a driveway and turned the car around, and I announced to Nate, "We're going to McDonalds!" He was thrilled.

Now, I'd like to tell you that when we went to McDonalds that day, miraculously the food tasted fantastic! But that would be a lie. The food tasted just a bad to me as it usually did. However, I knew I had made a breakthrough in my parenting, and I was breaking the cycle of generational sin. I was loving my son on his terms and his turf.

Two weeks later, I went to dad's night at Nate's preschool, and the teachers had asked the kids why they like their dads and they wrote down the student's answers on a piece of construction paper with a picture of the child on it. Do you know what Nate's said? "I like my dad because he reads me stories, he tells me he loves me, and he takes me to McDonalds." It was a lesson I'll never forget.

I don't share this story with you to say, "Hey, look at me; I've got it all together," because I don't. I've made many mistakes as a father, and there were times when Lorie and I would fall into bed at the end of a tough day with one of our kids, and we'd say, "Well, he'll be in therapy over that one!" But this was a time when I did something right, and I tried to build on it as my kids grew up. Maybe you can have a breakthrough like that in your parenting too.

Conclusion.

I recently read that a pearl is a wound healed. No wound, no pearl. An oyster takes an unwelcomed piece of sand and grinds and polishes it until it becomes a beautiful and precious pearl, and it's through the irritation and the *wound* in the oyster that the sand is actually transformed into a beautiful pearl. In a similar way,

when our family is extremely messy, whether this grinds us down and ends in tragedy or it polishes and refines us and makes us into something beautiful depends on what we're made of, and on what we make of the circumstance ourselves. It all depends on how we respond.

Ruth Bell Graham, Billy's late wife, once visited the shop of a man who specialized in piecing broken pottery and china back together again. Ruth wanted to buy something with a piece missing. When the artisan showed surprise, she explained to him that his activity reminded her of God's work in human life. She said, "God carefully and lovingly takes the broken pieces of our lives and our families and glues them back together again."¹

My friend Gail MacDonald (who will be speaking at our All Church Retreat this fall) says that we all have missing pieces in our lives because of our messy families. A death, a divorce, an illness, an injury due to someone's wrongdoing, betrayal. Still, God glues us back together. The cracks and the holes will remain until some day in eternity when Christ takes us home to heaven and they are restored to their intended beauty.²

While we're busy putting the pieces back together, let's not miss the opportunities we have today. It's easy when we feel wounded to dwell on and get stuck in the hurt we feel rather than discover the "pearl" God is producing out of it. Remember all that Jesus endured for the joy that was set before Him. God has a redemptive purpose in your suffering, just like He did in Christ's. He can take even your messy family and do something amazingly beautiful. Believe Him by faith, and join Christ in doing something about it. Amen.

¹ Gigi Tchividjian, *Thank You, Lord, for My Home* (Minneapolis: World Wide: 1980), 96.

² Gail MacDonald, *In His Everlasting Arms* (Ann Arbor: Vine Books, 2000), 93-94. The illustration about Ruth Bell is adapted from Gail's book, too.