

“Getting Unstuck So We Can Live Free!”

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“Getting Unstuck From a Dysfunctional Family”

July 15, 2018

Key Texts: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

I. Introduction: Dysfunction-It’s All Too Real!

Today, as we talk about things we can get unstuck from, let’s talk about getting unstuck from a dysfunctional family. I have no idea who picked me to do this sermon today. Oh, I picked myself. Well, that’s because I surely grew up in a dysfunctional family.

I know enough from talking to my father and my aunt that their father, my Grandfather Orndorff, could be a pretty mean man. While he was a hard worker on the farm and peach and damson orchard, he also smoked a lot and drank a lot. All 3 children left the home in their teen years to get away from it. Of course, they all married, because in the early 1960’s you didn’t live together, you got married. My Grandfather Orndorff died at 42. My dad married my mom when they were 18 and 17. My mom’s mother, after having 3 kids, up and ran off to Texas and vanished for 20 years with another man. So, there was plenty of dysfunction on that side of the family, too. And for the record, my dad would marry 4 more times and was divorced when he died 8 years ago. My mom remarried and she and my step-father have been married 40 years now. Yeah, Mom and Da!!

Turn that towards my wife LeeAnne’s family and it is a very similar picture. Her parents married young and divorced when she was 3 months old. Her mom remarried and was in an abusive relationship, divorced and married 2 more times. Her father remarried and he and Nana have been married 40 plus years. Go, Pop and Nana!

II. Learning to “Be” Together

I’m not sure how Lee Anne and I have stayed married 32 years this July, but it is not because we had a happy family life modeled for us. I do think that it is why we have tried to learn and to give some intentionality to having a positive, fruitful marriage. I think that going to marriage conferences, being in couple’s bible studies, learning to fall in love over and over again, and learning how to “be” together even with disagreements, arguing and annoyances is what has helped us get this far. I love being with my wife, I just don’t get to be with her enough.

Oh, by the way, did you know there is not much difference in how much happy couples vs. unhappy couples argue? They argue just about the same. The difference is what happens between the arguments.

I also learned this week it really does not help your family be more functional by studying dysfunctional family behavior. Most of the time research studies the opposite to improve things when really, we should be studying good behaviors so we can practice good and healthy behaviors in our family systems. We think studying bad habits and inverting those will help us cultivate good habits. No, let’s study good habits, how to practice those so that we can get unstuck from dysfunctional family life and move to healthier relationships which equate to healthier living which moves us toward living freely as God intended.

III. Jesus and Paul on Relationships

I’ve noticed, maybe you have too, that Jesus and Paul don’t really focus on families or raising kids, or how to get through a divorce, or how to be a good single parent, or how to affair-proof your marriage.

Jesus and Paul basically give guidance on how to interact with others, they talk a lot about loving others, forgiving others, helping others, so most of the teaching we get comes from that type of example. Love God, Love Each Other, Love Your Enemy was Jesus’ main teaching. Paul deals a lot in his letters with how we should be living our lives and 1 Corinthians 13 would be at the heart of his teaching. He wants his readers to

know there is “a more excellent way” (I Cor 12:31b), and to “follow the way of love...” (I Cor 14:1) And right in between those two statements is what we call The Love Chapter. And without breaking down every one of his statements and illustrations in that text, let’s just say Paul recognized the Corinthians did not treat each other very well. Paul saw a lot of dysfunction. He saw pride, selfishness, big egos, some being left out, and some “better than you” attitudes. Remember he says in relation to spiritual gifts—each part is important, not just the ones you see all the time. He saw issues of favoritism, being excluded, and eating and drinking too much. He saw issues of sin, not resolving conflict in healthy ways, and lust and affairs.

IV. Dysfunction Amongst the Corinthian Church

Do you think the Corinthians had any dysfunction going on? Sure, dysfunction is found all through the Bible. It’s how God works with us and how we work through that dysfunction that leads us down the path to destruction or to a better life.

There are different levels of dysfunction in each family system. It depends a lot on what has happened in the past and it depends on us recognizing what has happened and then choosing to make a break from harmful patterns. Do you know some are in dysfunction and do not even realize it because they really don’t know anything different? It’s the way it’s always been and they’ve grown comfortable with that. Some recognize it but have a hard time stepping up to change anything because it would drastically change the whole family system even if it were for the better.

Some continue to live in self-deception, believing a lie that “all is well”, when really, it’s horrible. But living into the truth can be painful. My chiropractor told me it may get worse before it gets better. Yes, it did! But now, 12 months later, it is so much better. The same applies to our dysfunctional families.

What did Jesus ask the man laying by the pool 38 years? “Do you want to be well?” “Do you want to walk?” “Then get up!”

I do recognize we could have a whole series on this topic. Come the first of the year, we will.

V. Characteristics of Dysfunctional Families

Here are some things that go on that cause dysfunction. Maybe it will help you see where you might have dysfunction and maybe you can target an area to work on to get unstuck.

1. Lack of Good Communication

One characteristic lies with communication problems. That is likely the most obvious characteristic. And other issues could be managed better with good communication. The bottom line is much dysfunction results from—get this—because we don’t listen to each other. 32 years and that is still our biggest issue. Really, it’s my issue. I think because I listen a lot all day I want to talk with Lee Anne and she actually want to talk to me and I interrupt and don’t listen. The other day, I was really trying not to interrupt. Ten minutes in, she says, “Are you listening to me?” I said, “Yes, I was really trying.” She said, “You did really good, now I’m looking for solutions.” That’s funny!

Did Paul say, “Love listens”? I think one could easily infer that.

And too often in families, instead of talking directly to a family member, who do we tend to talk to? Another family member, and therefore we fail to take the “monumental” risk of dealing with a loved one directly.

That leads to us being bitter, passive-aggressive and even distrustful, all due to our inability to communicate with one another.

Functional families have learned to communicate. Sure, it takes building up the courage to do so. I always share with people, be honest with each other. Share things with your kids that are appropriate. I don't mean mean things about your spouse or family members. Don't dump on your kids, but include them on challenges and let them learn to communicate better and more openly. Teach them to talk to people and listen, not talk about people and gossip.

Good communication builds trust. Dysfunctional families have little trust. In functional families there is trust. "Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth." (vs 6)

2. Addictions

Let me hit on a few others. Addiction is likely the 2nd biggest issue in dysfunctional families, but often is a result of dysfunction in the family. It is hard to know how to deal with the tension of living in a family that does not meet their needs and, as a result, many people turn to addictions to feel better, if it is only for a moment. We might think that means drugs and alcohol. Other addictions include pornography, spending sprees, being out with other people at bars, food, gambling, and even stealing. Being on the computer or on your phone can be an addiction. Anything that takes you away from communicating. "Love is not proud or self-seeking and it is not rude."

Moving out of dysfunction will mean acknowledging an addiction so that you can get help and the help you get will help you better communication skills and getting needs addressed in healthier ways. This is where faith, hope, and love can abound.

3. Perfectionism

Perfectionism is also a cause of dysfunction. Especially when a parent puts a great deal of pressure on the other parent or the children. Perfectionism is a constant source of negativity for everyone. It takes the playfulness of children out and actually makes it harder for them to learn. And do you know what suffers the most? Their self-esteem, making them feel incompetent, worthless, and inadequate. Paul says we all have gifts—Use them. Try! Don't waste them! Love grows, faith grows, hope grows in an atmosphere of communication, listening, meeting each other's needs, and giving each other some grace. "Love is patient, love is kind, it keeps no record of wrongs." Watch perfectionism, it causes way more dysfunction than you might imagine.

4. Lack of Empathy

Another, just to mention, includes us having a lack of empathy. Here is what Paul is trying to say, parents. We are to love our children unconditionally and our correcting them is to be targeted at changing behavior rather than making them feel bad about themselves. We are to love our kids unconditionally and that is what drives us to help the child constructively. When parents show empathy for their child's challenges, they teach the child to care for others as well as themselves. As Paul says, "When I became a man, I put away childish things." We may want our grown kids to put away childish things. Let's also not be too quick to point a finger at others, before pointing it at ourselves first.

5. In Addition—

Other things to look out for which cause dysfunction include:

--Excessive Control,

--Lack of Privacy-We invade our kids' privacy,

--Not Giving any Independence-trying to make kids who we want them to be and taking away their decision making,

--And Constant Criticism-picking on everything your spouse or child does. That includes sarcasm—I've done that when I got really mad and then I feel horrible because I really don't mean it. Teasing and put-downs in a sneaky way to say something actually only contribute to dysfunction.

VI. Characteristics of Healthy, Functional Families

So here is what leads to a healthy, happy family:

--Communication is open, regular and compassionate. We listen to each other.

--Each one's basic physical and emotional needs are being met.

--We hear each other out, even when we may disagree.

--Conflicts are dealt with directly with the other family member, not pushed out of sight, ignored, or covered up.

--We show unconditional love, even if we don't like some behaviors and we learn to correct in healthy ways.

--We work together towards mutual goals.

--Each member of the family is allowed to be who God made them to be, working towards their likes, interests, hobbies, and their own unique personalities.

And, finally, that means a positive, healthy open and loving atmosphere is possible for the whole family. We all function much better in faith, hope, and love and with God in the mix.

VII. Being Honest About It

My family does not have it all together. I can tell you we work hard on the communication and I think applying I Corinthians 13. "Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails." (vs 7-8) We hold on to this truth and when we get out of whack, we pray, we spend time together, we seek God's help over and over and it may not be ideal, but it is way better because we live in God's love and have found healing and hope along the way. We hope and pray the same for you. God's love is the more excellent way and will help bring us into the healthy, happy relationships we all long and hope for.

VIII. Closing Prayer

Let's Pray:

God, you are the one who showed us how to best love as you gave us the best when you gave us Jesus. We can't even begin to get out of the dysfunction until we get Jesus into our lives and families and into the mix and mess.

Give us the strength and wisdom to acknowledge where we are, what needs working on, and then the courage to seek help, guidance and a have willingness to learn and grow and take the risk to make some changes. To do so towards healthier relationships, families, and friendships.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.