

When you think of the word *family*, what kinds of things come to mind? What kinds of emotions are generated within you?

For many of us “family” brings connotations of warmth, love, acceptance, understanding, praise, caring and joy. But for others, “family” is the place where we are criticized, misunderstood, berated, belittled, made to deal with people we’d rather not even be around.

This morning, as part of our sermon series on FEARLESS LIVING, we are going to focus our thoughts on FEARLESS LIVING AS A FAMILY.

The truth is that family members know us better than anyone else. They have seen us at our best and at our worst. They have experienced us when our emotions have been at their extremes. They have seen us at times of great joy and excitement, times of accomplishment and success. And they have seen us at our worst . . . in our anger, in our sarcasm, in our ingratitude and in our lack of understanding and caring. Families know where all of our warts are. And they also know how to push our buttons.

The differences we experience in families can be invigorating and can create great interactions and creativity. But they can also create tension, struggle, and misunderstandings. The reality is . . . that none of us chose who would be in our families. We didn’t necessarily pick our brothers and sisters, our cousins, aunts and uncles. And when we marry, we inherit yet another group of people that become part of our extended family, not always by choice! These folks are simply our family. They are a given.

Sometimes we are proud to be a part of that family. And sometimes we feel trapped by them. Sometimes we experience acceptance and love, and sometimes we experience favoritism and ostracism in our families, resulting in feelings of jealousy and anger.

How many times have you heard people talking about dysfunctional families! Most of the time, people often talk about dysfunctional families as if they aren’t in one!

Let me just say that all families are dysfunctional . . . to a point. I don’t care what family you belong to, what people see on the outside is usually very different than what they might see on the inside.

Personally, when our family has had its moments of disagreement and conflict, one of us has made the statement, “*I’ll bet the congregation would love to hear a sermon on this one!*”

I recall a number of years ago, when Susan and I were disagreeing quite loudly and heatedly in front of our kids, and our youngest one, who was about 5 or 6 years old at the time, said, “*Dad, are you and mom going to get a divorce?*” I’m not sure where he picked up that idea at his young age, and I don’t even remember all of what I said in response.

But that question got my attention. And later as we talked about the incident, I remember Susan saying to him, “*Honey, mom and daddy may sound like we’re fighting with each other, but no matter how upset we get with each other, no matter how angry we get with each other, we’re not going to get a divorce. Because both of us will always say ‘I’m sorry!’*”

So for a moment this morning, let’s think and reflect on a question related to our families: **If you could change one thing about your family, what would it be?**

- Would it be adding a new family tradition which you don’t currently have but would like to have?
- Would it be fulfilling a lifelong family dream?
- Would it be including someone in the family who has been outcast?
- Would it be confronting a negative behavior . . . in you or in one of your family members?

Once you answer that first question, (what would that one change be that you’d like to make) . . . you move into a second question: **How can you move your family toward being the kind of family you have always dreamed of?**

The reality is that you can’t change your family until you start by changing yourself. And the very first step and the most important step to take is to start **by loving them unconditionally**. Now you might say, “*I already do that!*” But I want to challenge that idea this morning and ask you to think it through. **DO YOU REALLY LOVE YOUR FAMILY WITH UNCONDITIONAL LOVE?** Or do you have **CONDITIONS** that surround your love?

- We love you when you behave. We love you when you act nice. We love you when you do what you’re supposed to do. We love you when you make us proud that you are our son or daughter. We love you when you can do things for us!
- But what about when you don’t do what you’re supposed to do! What about when you behave wrongly! What about when you don’t respond to the way you’ve been taught and raised! What about when you mess things up really bad!

You see, unconditional love means love, with no strings . . . love, with no “if’s” . . . love, with no expectations . . . love with no conditions. That’s easy to say, but not that easy to communicate to another person.

Unconditional love is powerful. It’s like the love that God has for us, and it provides us with both redemption and renewal. Unconditional love gives us a framework for doing what needs to be done in our relationships!

- Unconditional love dares to confront those lost parts of your family life.
- Unconditional love dares to reach out in ways that are not comfortable or easy.
- Unconditional love wipes the slate clean. It listens. It forgives. It accepts . . .  
UNCONDITIONALLY
- Unconditional love dares to open up those hurtful words and behaviors that have been said and done . . . and then both forgiving and accepting them.
- Unconditional love dares to celebrate the joys that you bring to each other.

That kind of love and daring makes you very vulnerable. But it also makes you open to the fullness and meaning of life. And what FEARLESS LIVING IN FAMILIES means is that no matter what you are going through, God's unconditional love is always present in the midst of families. So now, can we love each other unconditionally! Can we forgive unconditionally! Can we accept one another unconditionally!

So what happens when you truly forgive someone? And how do you forgive someone who's harmed you or harmed someone that you love, in your family. Or . . . how do you forgive someone who has wronged you, especially within your own family?

Look at the story of Joseph and his brothers as we heard it today from Genesis 45. If there was ever a reason to hate your brother, it would be Joseph's reason. His brothers were totally jealous of him. They hated him and everything he represented. He was Jacob's favorite son. They were not! And Joseph's brothers did everything in their power to remove him from their father and from their family. Even if it meant having him killed . . . at least he would have been gone!

But after all of the horrible things that happened to Joseph . . . being left for dead in the desert, being sold into slavery, lost from his family . . . one of the first things that Joseph came to terms with . . . was forgiving his brothers. And what happened to Joseph (which is the key to the power of unconditional love) is that by forgiving his brothers, he was no longer a victim!

That forgiveness was not necessarily easy. It required Joseph to honestly confront his brothers about what was done to him, and how that made him feel. One of them denied hurting Joseph, but he had to choose to forgive them anyway, knowing what none of the brothers could go back in a time machine to either prove or disprove their feelings.

Joseph knew in his heart what happened and when he confronting it, it gave him a sense of validation. Once he was able to speak what "had happened" into his existence . . . without fear, he was able to speak what "could be" with sense of power. That was an example of FEARLESS LIVING WITH HIS FAMILY!

Another benefit of letting the past go through forgiveness . . . is that it gave Joseph the opportunity to see how someone may have changed since the offense took place. Had he remained angry and bitter, he would have always associated the person with **who they were rather than who they now are**. That was the case when Joseph saw his brothers for the first time in Egypt. And they brought tears to his eyes!

*“And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?’ But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.”*

As on previous occasions of weeping, Joseph has time, before his tears overwhelm him, to make preparations. Before he breaks down, instead of withdrawing, this time, he sends away everyone else. And the passion of his tears is unbelievable. His weeping must have echoed through the whole palace! His weeping is an eruption of the pain of his loss, intensified to a point that compels him to give up the masquerade.

Jewish writer and philosopher, André Neher writes of these tears: *“What is to weep? To weep is to sow. What is to laugh? To laugh is to reap. Look at this man weeping as he goes. Why is he weeping? Because he is bearing in his arms the burden of the grain he is about to sow. And now, see him coming back in joy.”*

*Tears are sowing; they are effort, risk, the seed exposed to drought and to rot, the ear of corn threatened by hail and by storms. Laughter is words, tears are silence. It is not the harvest that is important: what is important is the sowing, the risk and the tears. Hope is not in laughter and plentitude. Hope is in tears, in the risk and in its silence.”*

Forgiveness can be a long process. For any serious matter, forgiveness is seldom complete, even after the first time we choose it. In the story, perhaps Joseph’s tears when his brothers come to him after their father’s death, are a symptom that here . . . finally is the end of something that had taken him a long time to do completely.

Forgiving someone can be a painful, difficult thing to do. And so it may well be that in certain situations the answer *“I cannot forgive you yet - I’m trying, but I’m just not there”* is more honest and to be preferred than the glib words *“Never mind, it’s okay. Just forget about it”*.

In 2001, Robert D. Enright released the book, *Forgiveness Is a Choice: A Step-By-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope.*

His book provides data on a scientifically tested program that proves the direct link between forgiveness and mental health. According to Enright, a major plus in forgiving others is that it helps you find freedom from anger, resentment, bitterness and the self-destructive behavioral patterns that often come with those emotions.

On the other hand, a lack of forgiveness is like being tied down to the past while the future moves before you. It’s emotionally paralyzing. Whether it’s a matter of forgiving a loved one, a family member, a parent or a child, or even if it’s an issue with forgiving yourself, when you are nursing your own wounds, it can be tempting to not want to forgive. People often think the way to hurt the offender is to not forgive them for what they’ve done.

However, the quickest way to get on to the road of healing is to pardon, release and forgive what was done and the person who did it. When you don't, the person who pays greater price is YOU, not them. The flip side to this coin is, when you decide to forgive, the person who receives the greater gift is also YOU, and healing you receive is what matters most.

Joseph's actions towards his brothers illustrate a very important point. Forgiveness does not require an "agreed version of the past." This is crucial because arguing over who said what and who replied in which fashion frequently postpones or scuttles entirely the process of forgiveness.

Joseph did not say to the others "*Now before I forgive you I want everything perfectly clear. Let's establish the facts about that afternoon on the road to Dothan thirty years ago*". He did not try to rub his brothers' faces in their wrong actions. He did not insist that everyone agree about the history of the matter before reconciliation was possible. Joseph decided to draw a curtain over the past.

Forgiving does not mean forgetting. God promises that He will remember our sins no more, but this is an ability which God has not given to us. Computers can erase their memories, but humans have very little control over what they will remember or what they will forget. The more painful an incident the more unlikely it is we can forget it.

A better goal is to strive for a memory of the wrong that no longer harbors malice. **I choose not to repeat it even to myself. If I cannot forget it, I can at least try not to remind myself of it.** I will do my best not to dwell on it, secretly relishing my scars and bruises. I will not keep a list of grievances ready to be retrieved the next time I am hurt. The word 'forget' itself means to let go, to release or send away. That is FEARLESS LIVING IN FAMILIES. It is basic. It is foundational. And it all begins with unconditional love.