

HAVE YOURSELF A MESSY FAMILY CHRISTMAS

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CONTENTS

Foreword.....	5
1 My Great Big Embarrassing Family	7
2 Beyond Sibling Quibbling.....	19
3 Perfectly Parented?	29
4 The Empty Chair	41

FOREWORD

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” —*Matthew 22:37-39*

This is a book of messages, presented almost exactly as they were delivered at The Compass, a house church in Arizona. Since that time, The Compass has also become a nationwide television program.

The Compass is about two things: loving God, and loving people (Matthew 22:37-39). Sometimes, in a nod to Dr. Seuss, we refer to them as “Thing 1” and “Thing 2.”

These messages were written and presented by teaching pastor Doug Brendel, with enormous input and editing throughout by lead pastor David G. Brown.

You are invited to investigate The Compass via www.CompassDVDs.com. We’d love to get to know you!

1

MY GREAT BIG EMBARRASSING FAMILY

How much stress do you feel when you think about getting together with your family for the holidays? And I think our families are really more complicated today than they were even a single generation ago. It used to be Grandma and Grandpa, Mom and Dad, brothers and sisters. Now you've got birth-grandparents, step-grandparents, half-brothers, multiple divorces, adoptions, legal guardianships, children born to married couples, children born to unmarried couples, birthparents known, birthparents unknown. All the assumptions you could make, even just 20 years ago, have to be double-checked. The woman living with the man may not be his wife. The child living in the house may not be their offspring. A pregnancy might not lead to childbirth. Your sibling's sexual inclination might not be straight; it might not even be the same from relationship to relationship. All bets are off.

And then, in many cases, all these parties get together for the holidays! Oh, wow! The bigoted uncle sits down to turkey and stuffing across from the non-Caucasian adoptee. The daughter-in-law who can't get pregnant rubs elbows in the kitchen with the daughter-in-law who's just had her third abortion. And everyone holds their breath, wondering if the cousin from Colorado Springs will show up this year dressed as Larry — or Loretta. Some of our family members probably don't approve of some of our other family members. And some of our family members probably don't approve of how our other family members who don't approve of other family members *express* their disapproval of the other family members they don't approve of. Happy holidays!

The reality of life is, there's a lot of discomfort. I get cornered and have to make a choice, and I'm not comfortable

with any of my options. I'm not comfortable with my marriage, and I'm not comfortable with divorce. I'm not comfortable becoming a parent, I'm not comfortable putting the child up for adoption, and I'm not comfortable with the idea of abortion. I'm not comfortable with the kind of person my sister decided to marry and bring into our family circle. I'm not comfortable with the way my mother deals with my children, or I'm not comfortable with the way my children deal with their grandma. Life is complicated for me, and you know what? My family isn't helping matters. Members of my family keep doing things that I feel uneasy with, or angry about, or confused by, or — to be honest — embarrassed by.

It's bad enough when a member of my church family does something I disapprove of. Something I consider wrong. Something I think is a bad choice. Something I may define as "sin." But when a member of my actual family takes one of these missteps — something I disagree with, something I think was stupid or irresponsible — it feels all the worse. Because it kind of reflects on me, in a way, and I feel a certain responsibility for that person's actions. Maybe that's not rational, maybe it's not technically correct, but it's how I feel. Let's say you're close to your cousin, you grew up together — and she decides to leave her husband for another man. You're shocked, you're sick about it, you're hurt and angry and ashamed. Let's say your brother gets a girl pregnant, and he's hinting around that he needs to borrow some money so he can fund an abortion. *Oh, man, come on! Don't put me in this position!* Let's say your parents are in their third decade of marriage and your father reveals he's having an office affair with one of the guys he works with. You can't even talk about some of this stuff without your face getting hot and red, without your palms sweating. It's frustrating and infuriating and heartbreaking and — well, how many other emotions can you think of, all knotted up together?

But isn't this just like me — to be so tuned in to my own feelings in a conflict situation like this, and *not* tuned in much at all to the other guy? I think as families gather during the holidays, a lot of the tension stems from family members having a keen sense of their own emotions, but not really processing the reality that the other members of their family may be living in at the moment.

When I first met our lead pastor David G. Brown he was in

the throes of an extremely painful and quite messy divorce. He had grown up in a conservative religious environment, he had gone to Bible college and seminary, he had been in ministry for years — and now, suddenly, this catastrophe. He did not have many people in his life who could be described as “helpful” to him. By God’s grace, David got through that difficult time in his life — and a short time later, he wrote a short piece called *Five Things I Wish Someone Had Told Me Before My Divorce*. We’ve published it for you, and it’s available for you to take this evening. But as he opened his heart and shared these five concepts, I realized that they didn’t just apply to someone going through a divorce. These are five truths that apply to any situation where one family member has hurt another family member ... any situation where someone in your family has disappointed you, or embarrassed you, or infuriated you — by making some decision or taking some action, or failing in some way. This five-point outline is helpful in answering the question: How should I handle my newly outed gay brother-in-law? How should I handle the unexpected pregnancy of my teenage niece? How should I handle the impending divorce of my black-sheep-of-the-family sister? And so on.

You know, Jesus didn’t shy away from the awkward family scenario. He was born creating it. Jesus was the local scandal from the time his mother, Mary, started showing. Here she was, engaged to Joseph and then all of a sudden — bam, they’re married — and come on, people could do the math. By the time she was six months along, people were whispering. In that culture, to have gotten pregnant before you were married was an outrage.

So from the time Jesus was born, he was known as the bastard child. His little playmates probably taunted him. His friends’ parents made comments about him, maybe not entirely behind his back. It couldn’t have felt good. He grew up knowing what it’s like to have an awkward situation in your family. He knew how it felt for people to be appalled by you, by what you represent to them. I think he knew how it felt to long for someone to say something helpful. Something kind. Something loving.

When someone in your family fails, I want to suggest to you this evening that they are yearning to hear four statements and one question. Here they are, for your consideration:

1. “I DON’T UNDERSTAND.”

In a divorce, you just crave someone saying, “You know what? There must be a lot about your marriage that I don’t understand. For you to be willing to walk this road must mean that staying would be even more painful. I don’t understand that, but I know people only make huge life changes when they have to — when they are forced to — when they feel it is the best option available to them.” When someone decides in favor of a sexual life outside of marriage, they want to hear someone say, “You know what? I don’t understand this. But I don’t have to understand it. You have to live your life. I can’t imagine how you’ve been struggling with these issues under the surface. I am not burning bridges with you just because I disagree with the call you’re making here.” When someone in my family chooses abortion, they are crying out for someone to say, “I don’t understand. I can’t even imagine how you’re hurting. But I know you are hurting. I know it’s not something you’re taking lightly.” Any decision a family member makes — moral, ethical, legal, medical, financial, social, whatever — I can be horrified by this decision, I can be mortified, and I can still give that individual the benefit of the doubt as to what they are going through on the inside. How they have struggled with this decision, and may still be struggling. How horrified they might be themselves, even if they don’t show it.

* * *

Sometimes I need to say “I don’t understand” simply because God is God and I’m not. Only Jesus could actually peer into people’s hearts and know with 100% accuracy what their attitude was, what their motivation was. And on the basis of his perfect insight, he could know whether to speak to them gently and sympathetically — like with the woman at the well (**John 4**), or the spiritual seeker Nicodemus (**John 3**), or the woman caught in adultery (**John 8**) — or whether to speak strongly and sternly, like he did over and over again with the proud religious leaders. But I don’t have 100% accurate insight like Jesus did. When in doubt — and that’s almost always, for me — I need to err on the side of mercy. I need to acknowledge that I don’t understand what you’re going through — and if you’re hurting, you need me to acknowledge it, too.

I can’t know your future — and I also can’t really know your motives. The family member I disapprove of may feel

trapped — like they had no choice, they got cornered into their difficulty. They may feel guilty. They may feel like a failure. They may have lost all hope. How can I express God's love to an individual who feels this way? I could say "You are a sinner." Or I could communicate that idea without ever saying the words — by my body language, by the look on my face, by the way I interact with them, or decline to interact with them, when I'm with them this Christmas. Or maybe I could say, "Obviously things are really bad, aren't they? You must be devastated." Maybe I could treat them like someone who is hurting — because chances are, that's what they really are.

Most of the issues we have with our family members are not simple. Divorce, for example, is the result of multiple, overlapping issues. When you're married to someone over a number of years, you acquire tons of baggage — unresolved anger, personality dynamics, painful memories. For me to point my finger at the act of divorce ignores all of the underlying reasons for the divorce. This is not to justify divorce, or recommend divorce, in any situation. But we do need to acknowledge that it's unrealistic — it's *incomplete* — to address divorce as if it's just a single, simple decision. It doesn't reflect reality — let alone God's love — just to point at a decision and call it a sin.

Let's say you bake a cake. You pre-heat the oven. You put all the ingredients in a bowl. You beat them all together. You grease a pan a little bit. You pour the contents of the bowl into the pan. You put the pan in the oven. You wait the proper amount of time. You look in, you check the cake. It seems ready. You take it out of the oven. And just then, someone walks into the kitchen and says, "You know, if somebody bakes a cake, they're sinning."

It's already happened! It's been in the works for a long time. The steps you took to create that cake are already behind you. You can't unmake the cake. Right or wrong, it is a fact of history that you went through this process. By the time someone walks into the kitchen, the cake has been cooked. By the time I learn about your decision to do something I disapprove of, you've been in the process of coming to that decision for a long time. Heaping condemnation on you is not the loving thing to do.

But frankly, this is not just about being nice to the people in my life. I have another incentive for putting myself in your

shoes, doing my best to see things from your perspective — and that is this: I may be able to earn your heart. I may be able to serve as a connection to God’s love in the next stage of your life. God may be able to use me later on as a conduit, a channel, of wisdom or strength or some other divine provision for you. If I’m harsh or narrow or presumptuous with you today, I have little chance of earning your heart, little chance of serving as Christ’s hands and heart in your life in the future.

If you are at wit’s end, if you are desperate, you don’t need me to tell you how wrong you are. You need a friend. Someone to empathize. Someone to assume you have a reason for what you’re doing. Someone to believe that there’s an underlying current to this disturbing wake. Someone to see beneath the surface. Someone to look into the broken heart. Someone to understand how we *don’t* really understand each other’s pain.

* * *

The second statement someone in your family may desperately want to hear is this:

2. “I WILL LOVE YOU NO MATTER WHAT.”

This is hard for me, because I think I know God’s plan, and I think you ought to live according to my view of God’s plan. It’s also hard for me because I am inclined to dole out my love to you in little spoonfuls, based on my approval of your performance. The idea that I will love you even if you fail, even if you disappoint me, even if you do something I regard as reprehensible — well, this is a very far-fetched idea.

But in fact, God’s love for me is like that. **Romans 8:39** says **[Nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.** He loves me no matter what. It’s the “no matter what” part that distinguishes his love for me from my love for you.

When Jesus dealt with the woman caught in adultery (**John 8:11**), he said, “I don’t condemn you.” She was as guilty as she could be — but Jesus saw past the outward actions into the “no matter what” part of her life ... into her heart. There was a lot more going on here than sex outside of marriage. Outward sin — the failure we can observe in someone’s life — is just the fruit of the problem. It’s not the real problem. There’s a “no matter what” going on in the background, and it’s been going on for some time.

There are multiple reasons for someone to make a decision

that we would regard as a failure. But we see the outcome, and we tend to jump to a conclusion about it. In fact, I would probably have to say, in most cases our first instinct is to assign blame. We instinctively wonder “Who’s at fault here?”

But my calling in Christ — my job assignment — isn’t fault-finding. The sign on my spiritual door does not say “Blame Assessment Dept.” It says “Love Administration Dept.” When you knock on my door, you should find that you receive loving support — not necessarily approval, not necessarily agreement with your decision, but love. Because that’s what Jesus gave me when I knocked on his door.

Maybe God will speak to my heart about talking you out of your decision. But my experience is, that doesn’t happen as often as I think it ought to. And I’m never effective at talking someone into or out of a decision unless it’s in the context of loving support — me loving them as my first priority, and influencing them as my second priority.

When David G. Brown was going through his marital crisis, in the extremely conservative religious environment where he lived and worked, he was abandoned and shunned by most of his friends. But there were a couple of people who bucked the trend, who came to him and said, “Dave, I want you to be able to stay with your wife, but if you don’t, I will still love you and be your friend.” The practical side-effect of that approach was this: friends who were able to say that to him were the ones who “earned the right” to give him their advice. Then there were people who told him outright, or signaled him implicitly, that their friendship with him was dependent on his decision to stay in the marriage — and those friends, he automatically discounted in his mind and heart. He couldn’t give any weight to their words of advice — even if it was the same advice that he was getting from the others.

People making a touchy decision — people in your family doing stuff that’s going to make Christmas dinner uncomfortable — don’t need you to agree with them. What they *do* need is someone to say, “I will love you no matter what you decide.” This is the kind of grace-filled environment where people can share their thinking and their emotions openly, and keep exploring all the options.

Maybe you feel an objection in your spirit, listening to this advice. Maybe you find yourself asking, “If I love them,

shouldn't I try to stop them?" But there's an equally important question to consider: What's the best way to convince *you* of something? Will I be more effective if I get in your face and quote the Bible to you — or if I put my arm around you and tell you how much I love you? Are you more influenced by an adversary ... or by a teammate? As **Romans 2:4** says, **...God's kindness leads you toward repentance.**

If someone in your family has made a difficult call, they will probably arrive at your family Christmas gathering with high anxiety. They may feel like a failure. They may feel naked and exposed. This is not a time to talk to them about their "fruit" or use any other religious terminology. It's more likely to be a time to put your arms around them, maybe just hold them, and love them just as they are.

* * *

The third statement someone in your family may desperately want to hear is this:

3. "GOD STILL LOVES YOU — HE IS NOT FINISHED WITH YOU."

Even if a member of my family is totally wrong in my view, and I feel I have no choice before God but to take a completely "hard-line" stance on what they've done, I still have to come to grips with how God loves people in spite of their wrongdoing. God is the judge, **Romans 8:33-35** says. Not Doug Brendel. In the courtroom trial of your life, I don't sit behind the bench. I don't stand at the prosecution table. I can't even get up on the witness stand and testify against you, because I wasn't there, moment by moment, going through whatever you went through that led you to your conclusion. My role, in the trial of your life, is to be the loving family member, walking into the courtroom with my arm around you, sitting in the gallery praying for you, crying for you, hoping against hope for a good outcome.

Yes, there are consequences when someone sins, when someone fails, when someone makes a bad call in life. God's discipline takes this form. But if I avoid the people in my family who need or deserve discipline — if I condemn the people in my life who make mistakes — I will soon find I have no one to talk to. No one to associate with. No network of personal support. No friends. No family. When I judge a family member and shun them, I short-circuit God's plan of redemption. How can I possibly show them God's plan if I'm not speaking to them?

I hear people say they don't want to be guilty of "aiding" someone who's "in sin." It's as if I have some kind of obligation to treat you badly as a signal that you're doing something wrong. God has set up quite a different system, however. He has set up the world according to his design, so that when someone makes a mistake — when someone moves outside of that design — they incur a *natural* penalty. It's built in! The world is booby-trapped that way. So I don't have to be the police. I don't have to be your mother. I don't have to play God.

If anybody had the right to be the police and play God, it was Jesus — but even he didn't beat up on failures. The hallmark of his ministry on earth was associating with the immoral types, ministering among the sinner types, hanging out with the moral failures and the clueless ones and the losers. The ones that the religious community spurned because of their moral failures and their cluelessness and their loserosity!

That family member who has failed needs to hear from you that God loves them every bit as much today as he did before this whole mess in their life began — that he will love them every bit as much next week and next year as he does right now — and that he is going to keep doing everything he can to make something good out of it all. **...He who began a good work in you, Philippians 1:6 says, will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.** Someone who *hasn't* acknowledged Christ is going to find God's Spirit still drawing them. Someone who *has* acknowledged Christ is going to find God still working in them. Even after the affair. Even after the divorce. Even after getting pregnant. Even after the abortion. Even after coming out of the closet. Even after the substance abuse. Even after the felony conviction.

God doesn't love seeing them go through it. It hurts his heart. He cries for them. But he positions us to offer his love firsthand. To give more help, not less. Stronger love, not flimsier. Steadier support, not iffier. We all need people in our lives who will love us with a stubborn love.

* * *

The fourth statement some member of your family may be longing to hear is this:

4. "I AM NO BETTER THAN YOU."

When someone in my life fails, it takes me only a few seconds to mentally rank their failure against my failures, and I

generally find a way to come out ahead of them on that scale. But then I confront the truth that God expresses in the Scriptures, and I have to recognize that any supposed righteousness that I think I've achieved is about the equivalent of those rags you keep in the garage for when you change the oil in your Pontiac.

Isaiah 64:6 says All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags....

Chances are, if you're struggling today and I'm not, the truth is that you're struggling in a visible way and I'm struggling in the background, where you can't see it. If your sin is obvious, my sin is hidden. If your failure is something that everyone is talking about, it's not because I'm perfect; it's because my failure is something mercifully invisible. **1 Timothy 5:24 says The sins of some men are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them.**

Let's recognize that people fail morally because they don't trust God's promise to give them enough grace to endure their hardship. So they give up. But the difference between that quitter and me is that their failure to trust God is on everybody's radar at the moment — and my failure to trust God is under everybody's radar. Do I trust God to work in the “dirt” of my life the way he promises to? Well, maybe while you're going through your divorce, it looks like I am and you ain't. But in reality, I'm not trusting God with my finances, and you are. Or I'm not trusting God with my anger, and you are. How am I doing on patience? Or self-control? Or greed? Or lust?

We all fail. We all give up at times. We all do what we know we shouldn't do — from the apostle Paul right on down to you and me. But the ground at the foot of the cross is level. Paul himself advised the Galatians: **...If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted (Galatians 6:1).**

Sometimes a failure devastates us, and devastates those around us. But in the midst of that failure, it can be comforting — it can prompt the start of the healing process — if someone is willing to say, “I'm in the same boat. I'm no better than you. I still love you.”

It would be easy for someone to misunderstand this message tonight. It would be easy to say, “Hey, you're soft on sin. God hates sin.” We need to see that sin is anything outside of God's design, and any sin hurts. But we also need to see that

our role when someone busts God's design is not to condemn, to ostracize, to humiliate. Our role is to restore, and restore gently, recognizing our own weakness, our own propensity for failure.

Devastated, sin-weary people don't need more law. They need more grace. There will always be plenty of people in their lives looking down on them, second-guessing them, criticizing them, adding to their pain. We have an opportunity, as followers of Christ, to play a different part. Grace-givers. Love-sharers. Heart-builders.

* * *

And finally, chances are that there's someone in your family whose heart is longing to hear a simple question:

5. "HOW CAN I HELP YOU?"

It's easy to assume we know what someone needs. It doesn't take much thought to kick in to our opinion of their situation and spew our advice. But I don't understand your situation unless I ask, and in fact, I may still not understand it after you tell me. And if I don't understand your situation, then how can I know what you need? You're walking a lonely, pain-filled road, and the best I can do is ask you how I can help you. You may not even know. But if I ask you, maybe God will help us connect. Maybe he will help us come up with something.

If someone in my family is in the middle of a terrible failure, some enormous sin, they don't need trite Christian clichés quoted to them. They don't need a blank look, a helpless stare. They don't need to be avoided. They need a friend. A friend who assumes less and inquires more. Maybe they're in the kind of crisis where what they really need is a place to stay. They may need meals. They may need work. Maybe you can help indirectly in some way. Maybe you can connect them to someone. You don't have to agree with them to show them love. Jesus didn't. He loved people who strongly disagreed with him, people who couldn't have cared less about him, people who hated him, and he loved them all the way to the cross. He didn't wait for people to get good. He didn't insist on repentance first. He just loved us. That's our model.

* * *

At Christmastime, the odds go way up that you'll cross the path of more members of your family. You'll have more opportunities to be judgmental, or insensitive, or even harsh. But you'll also have more opportunities to be merciful, and gracious,

and loving. You have the choice.

God puts us in families as living laboratories of his love. It's in these sometimes difficult or awkward or maddening relationships that we really learn how to live out his design. How to rely on the inflow of his love, and how to maintain the outflow of his love. May God help us to get so full of his love, and see how utterly undeserving of it we are, that we can do nothing less than let the surplus overflow into the hearts and lives of our families.

2

BEYOND SIBLING QUIBBLING

I don't know what to get my brother for Christmas — again! I only have one sibling — Ronald Scott Brendel — and we're as different as we can possibly be. He's quite a bit shorter than me, he's blond, blue eyes. He's 43 years old, he's an academic. He's got a doctorate in vocal performance, he's on the faculty of Georgia State University. He's their resident lyric tenor. He's an opera singer. He has an agent. He goes to New York City for auditions. I was five and a half years old when he was born, and he RUINED MY LIFE! Until then, I had no competition. I was the oldest child. I was the oldest grandchild. I only had one cousin, and she lived in another state. And my brother was born with a bunch of medical issues, so he got more than the appropriate amount of attention. And then the whole time he was growing up, the recurring theme of my life was my mom saying, "Doug, play with your brother." What was she thinking? I hated him! Well, maybe I didn't literally hate him, but let's not split hairs. I treated him terrible. I think about some of the stuff I did to him and — well, I'm ashamed to this day.

I was online with him the other day, in a chat program. I said I'm working on this sermon about sibling rivalry. Tell me the single worst thing I ever did to you. There was this long pause. The chat window was empty. He didn't type anything. Finally he said, "Really?" I said, "Yeah, hit me." And when he told me what he remembers as the worst thing I ever did to him, it hit me like a brick. It was just a comment I made — but there were two things about it that struck me hard. One was, it wasn't all that long ago. I was assuming he would pull something up out of our childhood, that we could both laugh about because it was so long ago. But no, this was pretty recent. And the other was, the comment I made that hurt him so deeply was a *comparison*.

It was a comment comparing myself to him. It was a comment born directly out of sibling rivalry.

I've often said Ron was the good son, I was the bad son. Comparisons are the stuff of sibling rivalry. Which sibling were you? The pretty one? The athletic one? The talented one? The smart one? Which of your siblings was the one you wanted to be like? Which of your siblings did you want to be more like you?

It's rare to find a person who has no experience dealing with sibling issues. If you were an only child, you may have had children of your own, so you had sibling issues to deal with. If you're one of those extremely rare people who was an only child and never had children, you are one of the few human beings who has had no firsthand experiences with sibling rivalry — which means God has smiled on you, in an extraordinary way!

We've had trouble between siblings as long as we've had siblings. The very first kid on earth, Cain, murdered his little brother Abel. The historical record in the Bible is a tragic litany of sibling trouble. After Cain and Abel, the very next sibling story is about Noah. We all know the story of Noah and the ark, but we forget what happened after that: Noah had some trouble with his sons. When his youngest son sinned against his father, Noah placed a curse on him — and what was the curse? What was the worst punishment he could lay on the boy? That he would always be under his brothers — under their oversight, under their thumb. Jacob deceived Esau; they were twins, but they spent years as enemies, hating and fearing each other. Joseph was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. Moses had a huge fight with his brother Aaron and their sister Miriam. The book of Judges tells the story of Abimelech murdering all of his brothers — only one, Jotham, escaped. Talk about sibling rivalry! When David took food to his brother Eliab who was serving in the army, Eliab sneered at him. In 2 Samuel 13, one of David's sons rapes one of David's daughters. Solomon had his brother Adonijah executed. And we're still in the first 10 books of the Bible!

Chances are, if you have a brother or a sister, you have some issues. Maybe some nagging memories. Maybe some active conflicts. Maybe they seem permanent. Maybe it feels like, Well, my sister's always been that way, she'll always be that way. Maybe it feels like, Hey, my brother's not going to change, forget about it. Maybe it seems like this is an area where

God can't work. Maybe it's been so much a part of your life, you never really thought about God getting involved and changing things.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus chose to be born into a family? And not a very exceptional family, really. When Jesus came back to his hometown as an adult, and started teaching in the local synagogue, the locals were offended — because Jesus had such humble beginnings.

Matthew 13:

55 “Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?”

56 Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?”

it appears that Jesus had a pretty normal family, really. There was sibling conflict. **John 7:3-5** tells us that Jesus' brothers thought his ministry strategy was nuts, and as far as being the Messiah, they didn't believe him. I think if I was God and I was going to come to earth in human form, I would not choose to be placed in a family. I would just be, you know, independent! Or at the very least, if I had to be placed in a family, I would be an only child. I can imagine Jesus dealing with his brothers and sisters and thinking, “Good grief, you guys! I've got enough hassles on this planet, without my own siblings ragging on me like this!”

When you look at your brother or sister, what do you find yourself thinking? What do you say to yourself about that relationship? What are you saying to them in your heart, but not out loud? *“Oh you! You'll never change!” “You always do this to me.” “You've been like this our whole life.” “I just don't get you. How can you act like this?” “Where in the world are you coming from?” “Mom always liked you best.” “You're an embarrassment to our family.” “How can I get you to see things the way they really are?”*

I don't know what you're saying, in your heart, to your problem brother or sister, but in the next few minutes, I'd like to offer you 3 new statements of the heart. 3 statements based on perspectives from the Scriptures, that might help you in dealing with your siblings.

Statement of the Heart #1: ***1. “You and I grew up in different families.”***

It seems strange, but it's true: no two siblings grow up in the same family. My family had an only child for five and a half wonderful, blissful years — and then HE came along. My brother never had that experience. He came into a world where there was always, from the beginning, a tall, dark, handsome older brother. Your family history is unique to you.

But we also grow up in different families simultaneously — because of the different relationship dynamics between various individuals and combinations of individuals within our families. Your mom related to you one way, and related to your sister a different way. So you and your sister had different moms. And your mom related differently to you one-on-one than she did when she was dealing with you both together. Dealing with Mom when your sister was there at your side was a different experience than dealing with Mom in private.

Even in a family as small and simple as the one I grew up in, there were 28 unique relational perspectives:

How my dad related to my mom. How my dad related to me. How my dad related to my little brother. How my dad related to my little brother and me together. How my dad related to my mom and me together. How my dad related to my mom and my little brother together. How my dad related to my mom and both of us boys all together. How my mom related to my dad. How my mom related to me. How my mom related to my little brother. How my mom related to my little brother and me together. How my mom related to my dad and me together. How my mom related to my dad and my little brother together. How my mom related to my dad and both of us boys all together. How I related to my dad. How I related to my mom. How I related to my little brother. How I related to my dad and mom together. How I related to my dad and my little brother together. How I related to my mom and my little brother together. How I related to all three of them together. How my brother related to my dad. How my brother related to my mom. How my brother related to me. How my brother related to my mom and dad together. How my brother related to my dad and me together. How my brother related to my mom and me together. How my brother related to all three of us together.

On top of all this, all the individuals are continuously changing — even the ones you think will always be the way they've always been are actually morphing bit by bit, year by

year. For one thing, as each new child arrives, the parents' time and attention is cut by a percentage. They tend to take fewer and fewer photographs — just look at any family scrapbook. They tend to freak out less about eating food off the floor and other stuff that the first kid in the family wasn't allowed to do, because now they know it won't kill you. I think generally, as the parents get older and wiser, they parent better. So the first kid gets a lot of rigid performance-based guilt, and the last kid has a wonderful, carefree life. I'm being objective, I think.

In any case, I think of my brothers and sisters as having the same experience as me, so they ought to see things the way I see them and feel about things the way I feel about them. But they didn't have my experience. They had their experience, and I had mine.

So maybe I can say in my heart, to that sibling who's making me crazy, "You and I grew up in different families, and because of that, I can't know exactly what you're going through. I can't see the world through your eyes. I can't fully feel what you're feeling." And maybe, once I've made that statement of the heart, I can cut that brother or sister a little more slack. Maybe I can be a bit more patient, a little more sympathetic.

When Job was really hurting, his friend Eliphaz offered him advice. Lots of advice. Tons of what he regarded as constructive criticism. He talked and talked. When Eliphaz finally took a breath, Job said,

Job 16:

4 I also could speak like you, if you were in my place; I could make fine speeches against you and shake my head at you.

5 But, he said, I wouldn't do to you what you're doing to me. He said, **my mouth would encourage you; comfort from my lips would bring you relief.**

Maybe what my brother or sister needs from me is a change in expectations. Instead of expecting them to act and react as I do, maybe they need an acknowledgement from me that I'm not in their place. Maybe what they need from me, instead of constructive criticism, is just mercy.

* * *

Statement of the Heart #2: **2. "I am not responsible to you, or for you. We have to live our own lives."**

A lot of my frustration with my brother or sister could be

linked to my feeling that I have to take the credit or the blame for their actions. This feeling can have deep roots, all the way back to when one of you was assigned to be the babysitter and the other one was the baby being sitted. The older sibling is *in charge* of the younger sibling. Assigned responsibility for the younger one. Years later, the older sibling can still feel that sense of accountability for whether the younger one behaves and succeeds.

But the younger sibling can also come out feeling responsible for the older one's behavior. Being the younger one looking up to the older brother or sister, you come to realize that what you do affects their life. Mom and Dad go out for the evening, your big sister is babysitting you, and hey, you're kind of in charge! You can threaten to break a lamp, you can drag the finger paints into the living room, you have quite a number of ways by which you can make your sister crazy — or even get her in trouble. You spend your childhood feeling responsible for your older sibling — and that feeling extends into adulthood. What did we say when our little brother or sister baited us, and we clobbered them? "You MADE me do it!"

And now when your sister is struggling with substance abuse, you feel somehow responsible. Now when your brother's marriage is crashing, you feel like you've got to get in there and fix it. Now when your sibling is embarrassing you at a party, you feel like everyone's looking at YOU. It's like there's a connection between you — you're chained together or something — and when your sibling takes a certain step, they're pulling your chain. The conflict rises within you. Your stress level climbs.

But when God looks at you and your brother or sister, he doesn't see any such chain. He sees your sibling, and he sees you. Two distinct people. Paul the apostle asks,

Romans 14:

10 ...Why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

12 ...Each of us will give an account of himself to God.

13 Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another....

Well, this is certainly a different perspective than the one I've had! Let the chain be broken. Turn that person loose.

Galatians 6:4 says **Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else.**

Now, can I legitimately bring influence to bear in my sibling's life? Sure, if it's received. The only true influence is influence that's received. I have to ask God to show me not only how to communicate the truth, but also how to communicate in ways that this difficult sibling will be able to receive. God will actually do this, if we ask him to. He's committed to give us wisdom if we ask him. **James 1:5** tells us this. We quote **Hebrews 10:24** pretty often around here, but it applies perfectly to a sibling-conflict situation: **And let us consider** [that's too soft a translation from the original language of the Scriptures; there's an aspect of study and discovery in this word — it should probably be more along the lines of "let's study and discover"] **how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.** If I have a conflict with my brother or sister, I need to stay online with God about it, and ask God to help me legitimately, lovingly bring appropriate, healthy, well-received influence to bear on that person's life.

But whether God gives me influence in my sibling's life or not, at the end of the day my brother has to look God in the face for himself, my sister has to look God in the face for herself. I can't be responsible. God won't let me go that far.

* * *

And finally, Statement of the Heart #3: ***3. I love you — and that changes things.***

This may be a truly huge statement for your heart to make to your sibling, because of the pain they've inflicted on you. Maybe they abused you. Maybe they neglected you. Maybe the memories you're dealing with are overwhelming. Maybe your anger is still pretty hot. Or maybe you're just numb, after all these years. Or maybe this situation is painfully fresh, not very old at all. Maybe it's still going on.

So loving that person feels wrong. It isn't automatic. It isn't easy. Maybe it's repugnant to think about loving the person who has come to represent so much sorrow in your life.

But fortunately, I don't have to drum up love for my brother or sister out of nowhere. I don't have to manufacture love. God gives me the raw materials. **1 John 4: 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son**

as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

He didn't wait till I started behaving. He went ahead and loved me. He didn't wait till I stopped embarrassing him. He didn't wait for me to shape up. He loved me — and by loving me, in spite of my unlovableness, he gave me the capability of loving someone else who's unlovable.

John goes on to say in the very next line (1 John 4:11):

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. I shouldn't keep this to myself. I should share it.

* * *

Now maybe I know, beyond any shadow of doubt, that even loving that brother or sister isn't going to change them. I think about trying to love them, and I can't help but also think, "Come on, it's not going to do any good."

But the good it will do isn't necessarily to my brother or sister. The good it will do is to me. Love changes things — but the thing it generally changes is me. If I can let God love my sibling through me, it will be MY heart that gets healed. It will be MY spirit that finds rest. It will be MY life that finally begins to pull away from the pain.

As long as I hang on to the hurt, my heart has to labor. But if I can give that difficult relationship to God, I can get free. I can cease striving. My heart is finally doing the job it was designed to do. Not to harbor hurts — it's not designed as a pen, for holding in pain. It's designed as a tunnel. A funnel. Open to the love of God, and allowing his love to flow back out into the troubled relationships of my life.

* * *

What will it look like for me to love my problem-brother, my difficult sister, my impossible sibling? It might mean taking the initiative. It might mean dropping a note for the first time in a long time. Maybe a phone call. Maybe lunch? Maybe an invitation to come over and hang out?

It might mean forgiving an old debt. It might mean reversing course on a decision you made, maybe calling up and saying "Hey, I've thought about it, and I think I made the wrong call. I'll help you with that situation after all." It might mean just laying off bringing up a certain subject every time you get together. Letting it rest. Letting go, and letting God handle it however he wants.

I don't know, maybe in your family situation, love will

mean telling the truth, where up till now you've hedged. Maybe it will mean stepping up to be an influence where you've been fearful of that before. In that same letter, John goes on to say, just a couple lines later: **1 John 4:18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment....** Maybe you've watched your sister taking a certain course of action, and it's made you mad, but you didn't want to risk her blowing up at you if you mentioned it — but now, because you love her, you'll have to say to your sister, “You know, I love you and I will keep on loving you, but I think you're making a mistake. And if you're willing, Sis, I'll try to help you sort it out.”

Maybe this year, love will mean taking a different approach to Christmas. Maybe it will mean including someone who's been excluded. Maybe it will mean giving someone who's burned you another chance. Maybe it will mean doing your best to believe the best of someone in your family who's done the worst — and letting God worry about things like justice and fairness and punishment and so forth.

Whatever form your love takes, it simply needs to be love led by the Lord. Guided by God. Spoken by his Spirit into your heart. It won't necessarily turn out all tidy and pretty. There may still be difficulties in that relationship. But you'll have a sense of peace in your spirit, a sense that you played your part. Not expecting that brother or sister to be a clone of you. Not trying to live their life for them. Just loving them — and letting God work in YOU along the way.

3

PERFECTLY PARENTED?

When any of my friends are having trouble with their kids, I am really tuned in, because I'm a dad, and this is one of the most challenging things in my life. So I have this friend who has a daughter the same age as my son, 13 or so, and this young lady is really wonderful. She's smart and good, she loves God, loves people. But a few weeks ago my friend, her father, was looking extremely glum. I said, "Are you okay?" And with kind of a stricken look on his face, he replied, "I'm having parent issues."

Honestly, I was rattled by this. I mean, if THIS dad is having trouble with THIS daughter, what is the world coming to? I started praying for that family, asking God to move, to step in — I'm saying, "God, you've got a good thing going here; don't squander the investment you've already made here!" I'm, like, panicky.

A week or so later I saw my friend again, and I said, "Hey, I just want you to know, I really relate to your situation, your parent issues. I'm really praying for you and your daughter." He looked at me with a bit of a strange look on his face and said, "Not my daughter. My father. I had to put my father in a nursing home."

PARENT ISSUES! They go both ways. Just because I'm an adult doesn't mean I'm not still a child. I'm a parent AND a child. Sure, I will always be the father of three — but I will also always be Dick and Anne's elder son. In fact, I only picked up my status as a father when I was 30-something — but I've been somebody's child my entire life. Childhood is a lifetime status. Even after my parents have died, I will still be their son. Even those of us who go through life without ever becoming parents, are the children of parents. In a way, you might say, we are more fully the children of parents than we are the parents of children.

This would not be a big deal if every parent was the perfect parent, but most of us didn't have perfect parents. These

were flawed individuals. Think about your father. Was he even there, or was he absent? If he was present, was he present often enough? If he was there often enough, was he attentive enough? If he was attentive enough, did he need to be kinder? If he was kind enough, do you wish he were stronger? If he was strong enough, was he balanced? Well, yeah, let's say he was balanced, but then was he boring? If he was interesting, was he substantive? If he was substantive, was he too overbearing? Did you just kind of wish he were ... absent? It's a vicious circle! And we haven't even gotten to your mom yet!

We are born with these people attached to us — we start out completely dependent on them — our lives are completely intertwined with them — we have more years' worth of memories and impressions and opinions about our parents than about any other human beings on the planet. It is rare to find someone who has nothing to say when you ask them what their parents were like. It is also rare to find someone who totally agrees with their parents, totally admires everything their parents are and do and say and believe. We have this intense connection to these people, this lifetime link to them — we have this enormous stake in them, that we didn't even ask for, it was thrust on us — and yet these people don't do what we want them to do! They don't act the way we want them to act. But then to disagree with your mom or your dad — oh wow. The guilt! The pain! And what are your choices, if you do disagree? Remain silent, keep it to yourself, stew, grow emotionally distant from them. Or speak up, risk a fight, or the silent treatment, or however it is that your specific parent responds to advice or criticism or disagreement.

* * *

Is there a framework somewhere that we can use for dealing with our parents? Does God offer us any help on this issue? Yes, he does. It's curious, but we can get some guidance in kind of a surprisingly obvious place: the Ten Commandments. **Exodus 20:12** says **Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.** This may seem simplistic, but there are some nuances here that may help us.

This is the only one of the Ten Commandments that relates to a family relationship. Everything else is about how we interact with our neighbors, or with strangers, or with God, or with our

Day-Timer, and so forth. There's no reference to how I treat my little brother. There's nothing in the Ten Commandments about how I deal with my kids (except for "Thou shalt not kill"). Why is this? Why would God specify, in his design for our lives, that we need to honor our parents?

I think it's because out of all the relationships of our life, this relationship is the easiest to blow off. You may really strive to live your life by the Two Things — Love God, and love people — and still, without even consciously meaning to, *dishonor* your parents. For most people, it's easier to ignore your parents than it is to ignore your kids. You can generally avoid your parents more effectively than you can avoid your kids. You can probably make a negative remark about your mom or your dad pretty casually, and get away with it.

It's easy to get negative about your parents because, after all, think about it — you spend your entire childhood preparing for, and being prepared for, the day when you will get away from them. We are conditioned for detachment from them. The major movement of our lives is away from our parents. Even if you live at home your entire life, chances are, your parents will eventually die.

So there's a 3-way intersection of pressures *against* this relationship flourishing: DISSECTION, DISAPPROVAL, AND DISPOSAL. Here's what these mean: A. We have a most intense, long-term relationship with them, so we spend more time dissecting our parents than anybody else — they're under our severe scrutiny more than any other people in the world. B. They're imperfect; they're their own people, so we have plenty we can disagree about or disapprove of. C. It's our destiny to move away from them, not stay with them.

But God says, don't just go with it. Don't settle for the natural flow of things — where you scrutinize your parents your whole life, disapprove of a bunch of stuff, and dispose of them. God's recommendation is, Honor them. The way he's designed us to thrive is by honoring our parents.

In fact, this is the only one of the Ten Commandments that comes with a promise attached: **Honor your father and your mother, SO THAT you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.** This sounds like poetry to us, but it's not poetry, it's practicality. When God was giving the Ten Commandments to Moses, God was in the process of leading the

Jewish people into the Promised Land, which today we know as the nation of Israel. But throughout God's relationship with Moses, we find that the Promised Land symbolizes the place where God wants to lead us. God's best for you, as an individual, is symbolized by the Promised Land. The journey that Moses and his people went on to get to the Promised Land was in many ways parallel to the journey that you and I go on to get to where God wants us to be.

Now, if you're pursuing God's dream for your life — if you're consciously striving to live in as much of God's design as you possibly can, because you believe that this will be the richest and most rewarding life you could possibly live — then you will hurry. You will get there, to God's ideal, as quickly as you can, and enjoy the benefits of life in God's ideal as long as you can. For example, let's say I have a problem with anger. I'm always exploding. I'm always getting in fights with people. That's a part of my life that's really pretty crummy. It's not God's ideal for me. But I ask God to help me. I go to work on this. I get into the Scriptures and I make it a serious matter of prayer and I seek out serious help on my anger thing. And you know what? I actually nail this. I'm not perfect, but anger is no longer a major issue for me. I'm free from that bondage. I'm at peace. Life is way better for me. If I'm 50 years old when I nail down my anger issues, and I live to be 80, I get 30 years of enjoying life without the bondage of anger. If I had nailed it at 40, and live to be 80, I would have had 10 extra years of enjoying life without the bondage of anger. If I wait till I'm 65 to nail the anger thing, not only does it get harder to change at that age, but I only have 15 years to enjoy life the way God intended me to enjoy it.

God says if I honor my parents, instead of dissecting them and disapproving of them and disposing of them, I will have a richer life now. I will enjoy more years in the joy of his design for me. Because he did not design me to thrive by scrutinizing and judging my parents. He did not design me to thrive by focusing so much energy on the disagreement and disapproval I may feel toward my parents. He did not design me to thrive by abandoning my parents — effectively disposing of them. He designed me to thrive by honoring them.

* * *

Now what exactly does honoring them mean? Because depending on your definition of *honoring*, I'm not interested.

What if my parents are really wrong about something? What if they're goofed up in some way, and just bringing my kids around them gets my kids goofed up in the same way? If honoring my parents means I have to pretend to agree with them, forget about it. That's not honor, that's hypocrisy. If it means I have to keep putting myself in the line of fire with my abusive parent, no way. That's not honor, that's masochism. If it means I have to put my own marriage or my own children at risk in order to provide for my parents, that can't be right, can it? If it means I have to keep helping my parents hurt themselves in some way — contributing to their self-destructive lifestyle, or habit, or belief system — is that what it takes to honor my parents?

No. And I don't know that we can create a grid that will perfectly apply across the board to every parent-child relationship represented in this room. But I would like to put a few tools in your emotional toolbox that you can reach in and pull out and employ — along with the instruction sheet of Exodus 20:12 — as you strive to build an honoring and honorable relationship with your parents. Maybe in a situation this week, you'll look into your toolbox and find that one tool is better than another. Maybe next month, a different tool is going to be more helpful. And maybe over the coming year or so, as you ask God to help you in this, he will help you find new tools of your own to put in the toolbox. Maybe you'll have tools to share with someone else when you find that they're struggling with their own parent situations.

1. THE DISADVANTAGE METER. Our parents have several disadvantages. For example, the age disadvantage. We are judging their behavior from the unfortunate vantage point of immaturity. Even if you are way smarter than your mom, she will always have 20 or 30 years on you. She has lived more years than you; she has accumulated more experiences than you. So the view of her that you hold so firmly, you may actually find you don't hold so firmly anymore by the time you're her age.

And think about how you like it when your own kid criticizes you. What does your kid know? He's just a kid! I think that feeling follows us our entire lives. It's gotta be hard for anybody to take the advice or respond to the criticism of a much younger person — and we are much younger people than our parents.

They have another disadvantage: biology. Your DNA was

passed down to you without any forms being filled out or any charts being checked off. Are you hard-wired to be hyper, while your parents are mild-mannered, soft-spoken people? Nobody filled out an application requesting a hyperactive kid. There must have been a lot about you that just plain surprised your mom and dad. Maybe there was a lot they could teach you, maybe they could nurture you and shape you to a significant extent; but they had to play the DNA hand they were dealt when you arrived.

Your parents also have what I would call a memory disadvantage. Most of us have no conscious memories — or at the most, very few conscious memories — from when we were 3 years old or younger. Yet science tells us that most of the work your parents did in shaping and conditioning you was accomplished by the time you were 3 years old. In other words, by the time we began making our judgments about our parents, most of their work was already done. And they probably didn't even realize it.

So when my parents say or do something I disapprove of, it will be good for me to read their disadvantage meter. To review the disadvantages they've been working under. It's certainly more realistic. And it's better for me. God didn't put me in the justice business. He put me in the mercy business. According to **Zechariah 7:9, This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another."** It will be easier to honor my parents if I remind myself of, and keep in focus, the disadvantages my parents are automatically saddled with in dealing with me.

2. THE BAROMETER OF CHANGE. The old joke is that the older we get, the smarter our parents become. When we came into the world, when we came into consciousness — from our earliest memories — it's as if we took a snapshot of our parents. We saw them as fully formed, as if they had been stamped out by a big machine in exactly that shape. We perceived them a certain way, we put them in certain categories in our brains — and we *tend* to think of them that way for the rest of our lives.

But in fact, our parents have been changing throughout their lives, just as we have been changing throughout our lives. My parents were not stamped out by a big machine. They were *shaped*. They were children once themselves. They had experiences. They had difficulties to overcome. They had disappointments to process. They dealt with some stuff well,

they dealt with other stuff poorly. Maybe your mom was neglected. Maybe your dad was abused. Maybe one of your parents had a good life, but then a sudden shock that shaped their view of life. They are in the flow of life just like you are.

If we took a survey of everybody here at The Compass this evening, we would find that some of your parents left you. There was a divorce or a death. Some of your parents invaded your world — you had a second dad, or a second mom, after that divorce or death. You could tell me what your parents did well, and what they did poorly. Parents come and go. They excel and fail. And we love them or hate them for it. But *we don't tend to account for what brought them to those places*. How they were driven there. How trapped they may have felt themselves. We only tend to account for how trapped WE were.

I will never know fully what my parents went through — but I will tend to act as if I do. I'll tend to assume I know everything I need to know to explain why they did what they did. We only learn years later what they were going through when they did the stuff that made such an impression on us — if we learn it at all. In most families, the children pass on into adulthood and parenthood and old age without ever really understanding the forces that drove and shaped their parents.

And that means more than just cutting them some slack. It means they have hope of changing. Once a year I have to attend a certain convention in connection with my writing work — I've been going to this convention every year for something like 25 years — and I often cross the path of people I haven't seen or worked with for many years. It's kind of embarrassing, because I realize that they must see me as the person I was, say, 15 or 20 years ago — when I was quite a different person from the guy I am today. I don't want to be pigeon-holed as the Doug Brendel of 1981. He was a creep! (Well, at least more of a creep than the Doug Brendel of today.) I don't want to be treated as if I'm still the person I was. I don't want to be held accountable today for the stuff I've been forgiven for, and redeemed from, by the grace of God. God can change people, you know!

But parents are people too. Even parents have the capacity to change. You may think it's impossible after all these years for your mom to change, but God doesn't see her as an impossible case. Maybe you feel your dad will always be the way he is, and there's nothing anybody can do to fix him. But God isn't

intimidated by your dad. God sees, clear and accurately, the potential for that parent of yours to morph. To change. To grow.

There's somebody else God needs to change at least as much, and that's me. It may be more effective for God to change my perspective on my parents than to change my parents. It may be healthier for me if God changes my heart, rather than changing my parents' behavior. I think the psalmist David recognized this in his own relationships. He says in **Psalm 138:8: The Lord will fulfill his purpose for ME. Your love, O Lord, endures forever — do not abandon the works of your hands.** If I'm committed to honoring my parents, God may decide to apply the barometer of change to me — and if he does, that will turn out to be a good thing.

* * *

Here's another tool for your parental relationship toolbox: 3. THE INFLUENCE GUN. We talked about this a bit last week, in conjunction with our sibling relationships. I may be able to influence my parents, but the laws of influence apply. The only authentic influence is influence that's received. The influence gun is not like a rifle. It doesn't go *bang!* It's more like a glue gun. It's soft and warm. Influence doesn't usually hit a person between the eyes. It oozes into their life. But in many families, the child has such strong opinions about the parents, they don't have the patience to carefully glue the components of an idea together — they just shoot! And the parents don't react well. It's not perceived as helpful. It's perceived as a bullet wound.

Hey, look. God may not even intend you to be the person who influences your parents. *It is not your job to retrain your parents.* The re-education of your mom and dad is not in your job description.

I went through a number of years where I was a miserable burden to my mom and dad because I had taken it upon myself to get them to do stuff the way I thought they ought to do it. I wasn't trying to be a bad son — I was trying to help them. I thought their life would be better if they adopted my perspectives, and my prescriptions, on a wide range of issues. And we were forever getting into arguments. There was tension all the time.

Until finally one day, I don't even know how — God just had mercy on my parents, I guess, and on me — it suddenly came to me that it was *not my job* to retrain my parents. I could

relax. I could just enjoy them as people, and if I had a genuine opportunity to offer advice, fine. But if not, God was going to take care of them just like he was taking care of me. And I began to enjoy my parents way more. For a while my parents lived barely a quarter-mile from me, and it was great. And once I put my influence gun back in my holster, I found that God gradually shaped my perspective — and the stuff I thought was so important for my parents to do differently, wasn't really that important anymore. I was at peace with them, and at peace with myself.

And yet, I confess to you that as I began working on this message, I started crying — just flashing back to some of those conflicts with my parents. The ways we sometimes misunderstood each other, mistreated each other. We've had this great relationship for all these years, and yet deep under the surface, there's this strong current of memory. I guess it's safe to say that our parents will always represent a hugely emotional subject for most of us. People struggle with everything from pure hatred for their parents, to co-dependency on them ... in some families there's a silent, under-the-surface bitterness that's never expressed in words ... in other families it's a shouting match every time they get together. So there are 9 million different situations; we could never address them all individually in one evening.

But here's the one thing that's clear to me, from God's Word. To honor your parents is healthy for you. And it's healthy for you regardless of your parents' actions. Regardless of your parents' character.

You may have a very difficult situation where you actually have to set boundaries to keep your parents from abusing you, or bringing destructive influence to your own kids. But you can still express respect for that parent in your communications with them. You can avoid yelling at them. You can avoid bad-mouthing them. You might be able to say, "Mom, I respect your right to feel that way, but I just disagree." You might be able to say, "Dad, I think we've already disagreed about this. I don't feel we have to go over it again right now." Maybe before you pick up the phone to call them, you check your disadvantage meter. Remind yourself that they didn't have every advantage in raising you. Maybe before you respond to something that hurts, you check the barometer of change. Remind yourself that God can

still work in that mom's life, in that dad's life. Maybe you put your influence gun back in its holster, and instead of trying to manufacture some different kind of behavior from that parent, you decide instead to be satisfied with just praying for them, and speaking kindly to them, and letting the junk they throw at you glide on by. Let God deal with it.

I realize that some of us are painfully aware of the fact that we're all the product of our parents. We're living with that old biblical concept of the "sins of the fathers" being visited upon the children (**Exodus 34:7**), the tendencies and problems and mistakes flowing down from generation to generation. We're living with the ramifications of our parents' actions, and those ramifications are hard. What our parents teach us — good AND bad, by word AND deed — becomes ingrained in us like the ruts of wagon wheels. In fact, when **Proverbs 22:6** says **Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it**, the phrase "should go" in the original Hebrew is the same as the term for ruts in a road — a well worn path. So this goes both ways: the way our parents raise us impacts our whole life, for good *and* for evil. And if our parents made mistakes, we're trying to steer *out* of those ruts in the road. Our focus is on breaking the cycle. And that's a tough prospect.

But God is committed to helping us in this. He's committed to each individual individually. As we surrender more and more of our lives to him, he reshapes more and more of our lives in his image.

Along the way, part of that surrender might be giving up the grudge against our mom or our dad. Laying down the weapons of war. Honoring those who gave us life — because even if your parents weren't honorable, God used them to bring you into this world. To give you your start.

I think we could paraphrase what the apostle Paul wrote to his friends in Rome and fit it to our relations with our parents:

Romans 12:

16 Live in harmony with [your parents]....

17 Do not repay [your parents] evil for evil....

18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with [your parents].

19 Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

20 On the contrary: “If your [father] is hungry, feed him; if [your mother] is thirsty, give [her] something to drink....”

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

In God’s design, my parents don’t have to earn my respect. They don’t have to behave properly. They don’t have to say or do anything according to my specifications in order for me to honor them. God says, Doug, you’ll have a fuller, richer life if you honor the ones who produced you. He says, Doug, Dick and Anne Brendel were doing my work when they gave you your start. I called them to that role, and I want you to honor them for it. Respect them. Treat them well. God says, Doug, I’ve dreamed a dream for you. I’ve got a blueprint for it. Now dig around in your emotional toolbox, re-check your Exodus 20:12 instructions, and get to work on it ... so you can enjoy the Promised Land I’ve prepared for you.

4

THE EMPTY CHAIR

This week is Christmas, and many of us will sit down to a Christmas Day meal with our family. In a way, we've been imagining this meal all month long, in this series called "Have Yourself a Messy Family Christmas." On Christmas Day, when you look around the table, who will you see? Maybe your parents. Maybe your children. Maybe your brothers and sisters. So over the course of this month, we've looked at sibling rivalry, we've looked at parenting. And you may want to pick up the CDs of those messages if you missed any of them.

But we began the month by talking about the people in your family who, when you sit down to Christmas dinner, you really sort of wish they weren't there. Tonight we're going to wrap up the series by talking about the people in your family who, when you sit down to Christmas dinner, you wish they were there, but they're not. They're absent. There was a divorce, or a death, or a break in a relationship of some kind — and their chair is empty. They're gone. Where they used to be, there's a hole.

Maybe the most common scenario is the absentee father. Many of us were raised by our moms. Something goes wrong in the marriage, Mom winds up with the kids. According to the National Fatherhood Initiative, more than a third of all American children — 24 million of them — live in homes without their biological father. Nearly 20 million live in single-parent homes. More than 3 million live with an unmarried parent and the parent's partner.

Some of us were raised by only one parent even though there was no divorce: Dad or Mom was just never home, because of their work or whatever. (Ironically, it came time for me to begin working on this message while I was overseas, in Minsk — 8,000 miles away from my family for a week and a half. I was the absentee father.)

Throughout our lives, people we need let us down. People we love detach from us. People we thought were responsible for some aspect of our lives bail out on their responsibility. David G. Brown's father died when David was 5. Kristina's mother died when she was 8. I look around this room and I see a number of people whose childhoods are divided into B.D. and A.D.: before the divorce, and after the divorce. I have a friend who differentiates between her mom, her stepmom, and her first stepmom — and her dad, her stepdad who died, and her first stepdad. These are descriptions of disappointment. People who should have been there forever, weren't. People came into our lives, promised to stay, but then went away.

And it hurts. It hurts more than just your feelings. Studies show clearly that children who grow up without their fathers are 2 to 3 times likelier to wind up poor, to get messed up on drugs, to get into criminal behavior. They're 2 to 3 times likelier to have school problems, medical problems, and emotional problems. It would be ideal if everybody had the father and the mother they started out with. But we don't live in the ideal — and the result is pain. There is no pretending otherwise. When someone we rely on goes away, it hurts — and the reason it hurts is because we as human beings are *designed* to rely on each other. God made us this way.

Watch a child play with a doll or a little character toy of some kind. The child talks to the doll, and pretends that the doll talks back. The child controls the doll's experience. To the doll, that child is God.

But typically, what does the child do? She adds another doll to the game. She has the dolls talk to each other, do things together. She's still running the show — she's still God — but it's just more interesting to have more people in the story. It's more satisfying to her.

I think this impulse is part of God's image in us. God originally created one human being, Adam, and that seemed pretty good: they had perfect communion, perfect communication. There were no flaws, no hiccups in this relationship. The world was ideal. But God said, there needs to be more. This isn't everything it could be. This guy needs interaction. And not just interaction. He needs a helper. Someone or something to improve his situation, improve his life.

Now the first option wasn't to make more human beings.

When we think about Creation and the Garden of Eden, we usually skip right from Adam to Eve. But there's an interim period in the story that most of us don't remember. First, God brought around all the various animals, to see if any of them could fill the bill. Maybe what was lacking in Adam's life was a nice, fluffy ostrich to hang out with, or a quiet, dependable rhinoceros. Imagine if this had worked! Adam could go through life like Tarzan of the jungle, just relating to his animal friends, swinging on vines, swimming in the river, eating and drinking and having a good time.

But even in such a seemingly ideal scenario, there was still something missing. Something unsatisfied. And finally God decided what was really needed was *another person*. Another being on the same wavelength as Adam. Tarzan needed Jane.

* * *

Now the story would be great if God were playing with an Adam doll and an Eve doll. If these were robots, with no will of their own. But God decided to take a chance, and make people in his own image — with the freedom to *decide things*. The freedom to trust, or mistrust, anything he told them. The freedom to treat each other well, or poorly.

So what happened? Hey, all Adam and Eve wanted to do was improve their lot in life. There was a taste they hadn't tasted yet, and they wanted to taste it. There was some information they hadn't acquired, and they wanted to acquire it. God had said to them, I'll give you everything you need — and in fact he had. He said, You've got everything you need — enjoy it all — the only thing you need to stay away from is the fruit of this one tree. Everything else is fair game. And your life will be great. But Adam and Eve decided that life could be even better — if they got off of God's instruction sheet. So they sneaked under the yellow police tape, snagged a piece of the forbidden fruit — and the long human history of disappointment began.

The first couple failed God and failed each other. Either one of them could have said, Whoa, wait a minute, this is a bad move. This is not God's design for our lives. This is not the ideal. But neither one did. They decided to trust their own plan instead of God's plan, in hopes of improving their lot in life. And as a result, they both got hurt.

People have been disappointing each other and failing each other and hurting each other ever since. Members of our family,

the people closest to us, disappoint us and fail us and hurt us. Yet it almost always begins the way it began for Adam and Eve: they simply want to improve their lot in life — and instead of trusting God to be providing everything they need, they try a plan of their own. Maybe the person who left your family never thought in terms of trusting God to give them what they needed; or maybe they had heard of such a thing, but it was just theory to them. Or maybe they understood it, but they just couldn't see how God could be giving them what was best for them in that family situation. Dad wants a hotter sexual experience and walks out on Mom. Mom wants a career and walks out on the kids. Someone gets mad, gets hurt, gets disappointed ... thinks they'll be better off in some other setting, in some other relationship, in some other situation. So they go away — and come Christmas Day, they're absent.

* * *

Then what can I do about it? When I'm abandoned by someone I love, what recourse do I have? What's my response supposed to be?

There's a school of thought in the Christian world that says if you trust God, everything else falls in line. We sang, when I was a kid, *He's all I need, he's all I need, Jesus is all I need....* But this thinking is not realistic. It's not real life. It misses the fact that God designed us not just for the vertical, but for the horizontal. Not just for relationship with God, but for relationship with each other. The truth is, Jesus is *not* all I need. I also need you. I need my dad, I need my mom, I need people in my life. God has not designed me to receive everything I need from him. He has designed me to receive *some* of what I need from *you*.

It's true that in **Philippians 4:19**, God promises to meet all of our needs — but he fulfills on this promise creatively. He doesn't just do it one way. He has a bunch of different approaches. Some of my needs, he meets through other people. He wired me for this, so he provides for me in this way. He put me in a family. He gave me a church family. I'm in a community. Even if someone stepped out of my family picture, God sends someone else in to fill in the gap in some way. David G. Brown grew up without a father, but God put other men in his life who served as father figures to him. He would have loved to have a father to talk with and relate to, but God met his need

another way, met his need for a father figure, for love, for respect. Sometimes when one family member bails out, God meets our need through the remaining family members — in some cases, we need to focus on those who we still have, instead of those we've lost.

God designs us for relationship with him and relationship with people — but people fail us, and God doesn't. So when people fail us, God takes up the slack. God is in the need-meeting business. And he has a lot of different need-meeting strategies. Sometimes he just gives me the strength to hang on. Sometimes he gives me wisdom to comprehend a situation. Sometimes he gives me a sense of peace so I don't freak out over what I don't understand.

* * *

Maybe it seems kind of weird, that God would design us to need each other — when people always fail each other. What's up with that? Why does he design me to need something that's guaranteed to hurt me? Isn't that just the most sadistic thing you've ever heard of?

No, it's really quite wonderful. Here's the reality: God created me in his image, to be like him — and the best thing about him is his amazing love. His willingness to love even the unlovable. His grace. This unconditional, unstoppable love is the most powerful force in the universe — and God's great longing for me is to experience it. To learn it. To live it. So he designed the world not around just one thing — loving him — but around two things: Thing 1 and Thing 2, loving God and loving people. He says, Doug, learn to love the way I love, and you will have the richest possible life. Learn to love the unlovely. The unlovable family member. The hurtful one. The embarrassing one. The ugly one. The absent one.

It's easy to love the one who makes me happy. But frankly, in that mutually satisfying relationship, I'm not learning love. It's not real love — it's just *enjoyment*. I'm enjoying that person. Feels good, feels great. But it's not really love. Where I learn to truly love is in a *difficult* relationship ... in a relationship where I'm not fully appreciated. Real love shows up when my needs are *not* being met. In **Luke 6:32-35**, Jesus teaches this. He says even pagans love people who love them. It's a cinch! But the great rewards, he says, are in loving the hateful ones, the mean ones, those who have made themselves our enemies. This

is where we become more like God, and somehow, at the end of the day, this feels more “right” than “wrong.” Even though it’s counter-intuitive to love an enemy. Even though it’s difficult.

You know, Jesus was a perfect picture of God’s love, of course, and he gave himself for the sake of people who didn’t appreciate him. So when he said in **John 15:12,13**, **...Love each other as I have loved you**, he was talking about the hard kind of love. In the very next breath, in **John 15:13**, he said **Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends**. This is a pretty famous verse of Scripture; we’ve heard it quoted quite a bit — and we generally think of it in terms of Jesus dying on the cross. But my life isn’t just one day, the day I die — my life is long. If I lay down my life, I’m laying down a number of days, weeks, months, years. In a way, it might actually be easier to *die* for someone than to *live* for them. Dying you only have to do once; but living you have to do every day, day after day. It’s *work*.

When I meet someone else’s need without regard for my own needs, I’m becoming more like God. More like God designed me to be. It’s going to feel more “right.” I’m going to be more at peace — because I’m becoming the person I was originally mapped out to become. You might say I’m *becoming myself*.

Now this may sound like the setup for a miserable life. Fortunately, however, God doesn’t simply give us this command — love your enemies — and leave us to our own devices. He gives us what we need in order to do it. God never calls us to a challenge without equipping us for it. If he had called us to throw snowballs, he would make it snow every day. If he had called us to spray water at each other, there would be a constant flow of water through the garden hose. Since he calls us to love our enemies, he offers an endless flow of love into our lives. His gifts to me, his blessings, his provision for me, all of these are reminders of his love. The way he keeps providing for me even when I fail him — that’s real love. When I recognize the amazing way he cares for me, the way he’s filling me up all the time with his love, I can spill some of that out on somebody else.

* * *

When your family gathers on Christmas Day and you look around that table and your dad is absent — in that part of you that’s still furious with him because he left you and your family

— can you take something of God's love and give it to your dad? Can you love him even though he didn't love you the way you wanted him to? Or will you keep hating him? On the morning after Christmas, you can either wake up with that rage still hanging around your neck ... or you can be free of it. True love is what makes the difference.

Or as you sit down to Christmas dinner and you're painfully reminded of how your spouse was taken away from you, maybe they fell ill and died, maybe they were in an accident, and somewhere deep inside you, you're still sick with the pain and anger — can you take something of God's love and start to fill in the hole? **Psalm 68:5** says God is **A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows....** God knows that those people in your life disappointed you, and he's willing to take up the slack. On the morning after Christmas, you can either wake up with that loss still burning in your stomach ... or you can be on your way to healing. True love is what will make the difference.

Come Christmas Day, you may be thinking about someone in your family who had to go away. They were too abusive, too dangerous. Love doesn't mean letting someone abuse you. Sometimes the best thing you can do for someone is to stop being with them, stop feeding their dysfunction. Sometimes separation is the most loving thing you can do. Then true love may be a matter of praying for them, caring for them from afar if it's possible — and in those inevitable family conversations where someone is bad-mouthing them, talking about them in loving terms. You can wake up the morning after Christmas with a heart of love for that missing person, still believing the best, hoping the best, trusting God for his best — for them, and for you.

Psalm 68:6 talks about this. It's an odd little passage of Scripture, at first glance — but I think it serves as kind of a Christmas family picture. Not a sweet, syrupy Kodak moment, but kind of a gritty black-and-white snapshot of family life the way it really is. The psalmist David wrote it, and it says three things: **God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.** First, *he sets the lonely in families.* He gives us each other. Even though we're imperfect and sometimes we hurt each other, it's better to be with each other than all alone in the

world. Next, *he leads forth the prisoners with singing*. In impossible situations, he makes a way of escape. In abusive relationships, he offers hope. Even in separation, he gives a song. A sense of peace. Finally, though, David makes this observation: *the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land*. It's the people who rebel against God's plan, who refuse to accept God's love, who suffer the most. They feel the heat of their own choosing. God's love isn't flowing through them into those around them, and they're the ones who are drying up as a result.

* * *

Maybe in some of our families, the best Christmas gift we can give is the gift of grace — the same kind of gift God gave us — where we decide to love someone even though they don't deserve it. Maybe we decide that we can't fully understand our parents' divorce, so we're just going to let God love them through us. Or we decide that we can't bring back the one who's gone, so we're just going to let God love them — and love those who remain — through us. Maybe this Christmas, it's time to open up the gift of grace, and then take the box it came out of, and put the blame in there, and the rage, and the questions, and the hurt — and close it back up, and throw it out with the ribbons and the torn-up wrapping paper.

I can't control what my parents do, I can't change what they did. I can't control what anybody in my family does, or did. All I can control is my response. I can use their behavior as an excuse for my own behavior — but that excuse will be false, and that kind of life will be exhausting. The anger and hurt will drag me down. What my dad may have done to me won't kill me — but a lifetime of unforgiveness will. What my mom may have done to me may have been painful, but it wasn't deadly — my lifetime of unforgiveness will be.

God gives me another option. He pours his love in, enough that I can let it flow back out, to cleanse the wounds that my family members have inflicted on me. I can forgive them, I can love them, I can live in the fullness of God's design — I can be free.

If you would like to interact personally about your spiritual journey, please feel free to contact The Compass Fellowship via www.CompassDVDs.com.