

## How to Overcome Family Mess

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Rich Nathan  
February 16 & 17, 2019  
Family Matters  
Genesis 42:1-13; 45:1-7

There was a film that came out about 15 years ago titled “It Runs in the Family”. It featured three generations of the Douglas family – son Cameron Douglas, father Michael Douglas, and legendary grandfather Kirk Douglas.

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Photo

But the film could have easily been about the Douglas family’s other legacy which is a legacy of addiction.

Cameron, the son, spent seven years in prison for drug smuggling, selling meth to support his heroin addiction. His father, Michael, went into rehab for alcoholism back in the 90’s. Michael’s half-brother, Eric, died of a drug overdose at the age of 46. And Michael’s first wife also had alcoholism running through her family. Michael Douglas has been very open about the addiction to substances that runs through his entire family.

Statistics reveal that addictions do tend to run in families.

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- Children of addicts are 8 times more likely to develop an addiction
- Sons of alcoholic fathers are 4 times more likely to become alcoholics
- Children of addicted parents experience greater physical and mental health problems and higher health and welfare costs than do children from non-addicted families

The most common explanation for this family linkage is that addiction, at least according to addiction specialists, seems to have both a genetic component to it as well as an environmental component. Addiction seems to be a product of both nature and nurture. But it is a disease that impacts everyone in the family – even non-addicts.

Any of you have a child with an addiction or a spouse or a parent, a sister or a brother? You have seen in your own families, haven’t you, that one family member’s addiction puts tremendous strain on everyone else, even though they are not addicted? A child’s addiction will put tremendous strain on their parents’ marriage, on their siblings, on their family members’ emotional and psychological health. A parent or spouse’s

addiction will affect other family members' physical health. The ripple effects of addiction are so far reaching.

This is not just true of substance abuse. It's also sadly true with respect to sexual abuse. Statistics reveal a strong correlation for men, but not for women, between having been a sexual abuse victim and becoming a perpetrator of abuse. Of course, the vast majority of victims never victimize others. But one of the risk factors in becoming an abuser is that man was himself abused.

Legacies don't just work in the negative direction. You know that we can give our children and grandchildren positive inheritances. For example, compared to kids whose parents never attended college, kids who have at least one parent who earned a college degree:

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- Are 2 ½ times more likely to earn AP/IB credits in high school
- Are more than 2 times more likely to take an academically focused curriculum in high school
- Are 3 times more likely to attend a private college
- Are 4 times more likely to attend a 4-year public college
- Are much more likely to complete college

Now if followers of Jesus are anything, we are not determinists. Your past doesn't have to be your future! Your dad's sins don't have to be your destiny! Generational garbage doesn't have to be your eternal inheritance!

But we followers of Jesus also understand that overcoming family mess is not automatic. Just because you've accepted Jesus into your life doesn't mean that you never need to deal with the pain caused by your mom's affair, your dad's absence, your stepfather's indifference, your sister's addiction, your experience of abuse or whatever. Family mess can be overcome. This is part of the good news of the gospel. But our family mess must be confronted honestly and with God's help.

I've called today's talk "How to Overcome Family Mess". Let's pray.

Family mess is not a recent phenomenon. It's not just a part of urban life or a part of modern life. As far back as the records go, we can find family mess.

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Family mess is everywhere in the Bible

We look back to the first book of the Bible. Way back in the Old Testament book of Genesis. We see the family mess of the patriarchs handed down generation after generation. We see it in the patriarchs' parenting styles, **especially in their playing of**

**favorites.** Abraham had a favorite son, Isaac. Isaac had a favorite son, Esau, while his wife Rebekah had a favorite son, Jacob. Jacob had a favorite son, Joseph, and later, Benjamin.

We see the family mess of **constant sibling rivalry** in the patriarchs' families – Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers.

We see family mess in the **stress of infertility.** Sarah couldn't get pregnant. Her daughter-in-law, Rebekah, couldn't get pregnant. Her daughter-in-law, Rachel, couldn't get pregnant. And each of them had various schemes to try to get pregnant.

We see a **pattern of lying** in every generation. Abraham lied twice about Sarah. Isaac and Rebekah's marriage was characterized by lies. Jacob lied to almost everyone all the time. In fact, his name means "deceiver". Jacob's sons lied about Joseph's death. They faked a family funeral and kept a family secret for decades.

And there was a **cutting off of family relationship.** Not only were siblings rivals, but generation after generation one sibling was cut off from the other. Isaac and Ishmael were cut off from one another for years. Jacob fled from his brother, Esau, and was cut off from him for decades. Joseph was cut off from his 10 brothers for decades.

I could go through the same basic story of family mess in the story of the kings of Israel, especially King David's family. His sons and grandchildren, generation after generation of mess.

Do you see negative family patterns repeated at all in your family? Someone having an affair? Or estrangement between family members, unhealed relationships? Or a legacy of repeated divorces? Or substance abuse? Or anger? Do you see any negative legacies? A tendency toward anxiety? Pregnancies outside of marriage? An inability to admit when you're wrong?

Pete Scazzero, a pastor in New York, wrote a best-selling book a number of years ago called *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*.

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Book cover

I can't recommend it enough. In fact, our small group went through Pete Scazzero's book and study guide together this autumn.

Scazzero offers one reason why there are these legacies in our lives. What Scazzero points out is that

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## Family rules impact everything in our lives

Scazzero said that just like God gave 10 Commandments we need to obey, so our families give us commandments. Some of them are explicit – they’re actually stated. Others are implicit – it’s just the way things are. These rules are what’s considered normal in our family. But we grew up with these 10 commandments.

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The slide consists of two arched panels, each containing a list of family rules. The left panel contains rules 1 through 5, and the right panel contains rules 6 through 10. Each rule is numbered and followed by a title and a list of bullet points.

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| <p><b>1. Money</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Money is the best source of security.</li><li>• The more money you have, the more important you are.</li><li>• Make lots of money to prove you “made it”</li></ul> <p><b>2. Conflict</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Avoid conflict at all costs.</li><li>• Don’t get people mad at you.</li><li>• Loud, angry, constant fighting is normal.</li></ul> <p><b>3. Sex</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sex is not to be spoken about openly.</li><li>• Men can be promiscuous; women must be chaste.</li><li>• Sexuality in marriage will come easily.</li></ul> <p><b>4. Grief and Loss</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sadness is a sign of weakness.</li><li>• You are not allowed to be depressed.</li><li>• Get over losses quickly and move on.</li></ul> <p><b>5. Expressing Anger</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Anger is dangerous and bad.</li><li>• Explode in anger to make a point.</li><li>• Sarcasm is an acceptable way to express anger.</li></ul> | <p><b>6. Family</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• You owe your parents for all they’ve done for you.</li><li>• Don’t speak of your family’s “dirty laundry” in public.</li><li>• Duty to family and culture comes before everything.</li></ul> <p><b>7. Relationships</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Don’t trust people. They will let you down.</li><li>• Nobody will ever hurt me again.</li><li>• Don’t show vulnerability.</li></ul> <p><b>8. Attitudes toward Different Cultures</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Only be close friends with people who are like you.</li><li>• Do not marry a person of another race or culture.</li><li>• Other races/cultures are not as good as mine.</li></ul> <p><b>9. Success</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is getting into the “best schools”.</li><li>• Is making lots of money.</li><li>• Is getting married and having children.</li></ul> <p><b>10. Feelings and Emotions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• You are not allowed to have certain feelings.</li><li>• Your feelings are not important.</li><li>• Reacting with your feelings without thinking is okay.</li></ul> |
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Let me read through these and maybe you can find some of these rules in your own life. Of course, each of our families are different. Every family mess is different. As Tolstoy, the Russian writer put it in the opening line of his famous novel, *Anna Karenina*:

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All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

So, every family mess has its own spin. Often, it comes out in our siblings in different ways.

Of course, you can add to the list. What were the messages that you were brought up with regarding what good parenting looked like? Or what gender roles ought to be like in marriage? Or how physical affection ought to be shown? How did your family raise

you to think about God or about church? Or about other churches or other faiths? How did your family raise you to think about which political party was right and which was wrong?

Family patterns. Family rules. Family messages. Family mess impacts everything in our lives.

Here's the good news:

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Family mess is overcome every day in Christian experience

As I said in my introduction, overcoming family mess is not just automatic. We don't just move on.

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Don't just move on

Let's read the story of Joseph.

Slide Genesis 42:1-13

When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you just keep looking at each other?" <sup>2</sup> He continued, "I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us, so that we may live and not die."

<sup>3</sup> Then ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain from Egypt. <sup>4</sup> But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with the others, because he was afraid that harm might come to him. <sup>5</sup> So Israel's sons were among those who went to buy grain, for there was famine in the land of Canaan also.

<sup>6</sup> Now Joseph was the governor of the land, the person who sold grain to all its people. So when Joseph's brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground. <sup>7</sup> As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them. "Where do you come from?" he asked.

"From the land of Canaan," they replied, "to buy food."

<sup>8</sup> Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. <sup>9</sup> Then he remembered his dreams about them and said to them, "You are spies! You have come to see where our land is unprotected."

<sup>10</sup> "No, my lord," they answered. "Your servants have come to buy food. <sup>11</sup> We are all the sons of one man. Your servants are honest men, not spies."

<sup>12</sup> "No!" he said to them. "You have come to see where our land is unprotected."

<sup>13</sup> But they replied, "Your servants were twelve brothers, the sons of one man, who lives in the land of Canaan. The youngest is now with our father, and one is no more."

When you go through Joseph's life in the book of Genesis, he suffered so many wounds as a result of family mess. His father, Jacob, married a woman that he didn't love so he

could finally marry a woman he did love. Jacob's two wives were sisters. Do you think that was a disaster ready to happen? Might as well light a cigarette in a dynamite factory. The sisters compete regarding who's going to be able to bear children. And Jacob compounds things by having children by two of his concubines. Finally, his favorite wife has a son, Joseph.

The family is broken by competition, by jealousy and by favoritism. Jacob shows his obvious preference for Joseph over all of his brothers. He gives Joseph a richly ornamented coat – some translations say a coat of many colors. And clueless Jacob sends Joseph out to find his brothers who are tending the sheep. The brothers hate Joseph so much because of Dad's favoritism that they plot to kill him. Eventually, instead of killing him, Joseph is sold as a slave and is brought to Egypt.

But Joseph's life turns around. Through God's blessings and hard work, Joseph rises in the ranks of the Egyptian court and eventually becomes second in command – just under Pharaoh. The coat of many colors has been replaced with the royal robe of the king.

Joseph thought, "I can just move on. I don't have to deal with my past, the family mess of my father and brothers. I've made a success out of my life. I don't have to think about what was done to me. I'll just move on."

In fact, here's what we read in Genesis 41:

Slide Genesis 41:51-52

<sup>51</sup> Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." <sup>52</sup> The second son he named Ephraim and said, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering."

Joseph named one of his sons "God made me forget" and his other son "God made me fruitful". I don't have to deal with my past. I don't have to go back to Canaan and try to resolve things with my family. All the garbage is buried. I can just forget it. God has made me fruitful. I can just move on.

Sadly, a lot of Christians are taught a really bad theology when it comes to dealing with our past. A lot of Christians are taught that when you come to Christ, you are a new creation. As the Apostle Paul puts it:

Slide 2 Corinthians 5:17

<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

It's true. God starts something new in your life. He puts a new spirit, his Holy Spirit, in you. He gives you as a Christian a new future, a new destiny, new capacities. Being a

new creation doesn't mean you never have to deal with your past. We are new, but not entirely new.

We're still impacted by our past in a thousand ways. Joseph thinks, "I'm just going to move on." And a lot of Christians think that way. "I've moved far away from my hometown and my family. I've got a new life." But then Joseph's brothers show up. Genesis 41 and 42 tell us that there was a famine in the Middle East, a famine that affected Canaan, the Promised Land. Joseph's brothers go down to Egypt where they heard there was grain. He hadn't seen his brother in years. They are older, balder, grayer, and thin from hunger and travel. They didn't recognize Joseph. According to Egyptian custom, he may have been wearing a black wig. He was much older. The Egyptian rulers wore makeup. He wasn't speaking Hebrew, he was speaking Egyptian. He spoke to his brothers roughly. They never recognized that this was their baby brother. He never let on that he spoke Hebrew. Instead, we read in Genesis 42

Slide Genesis 42:7

<sup>7</sup> As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them. "Where do you come from?" he asked. "From the land of Canaan," they replied, "to buy food."

Let me ask you a question. Why did God bring Joseph's brothers back into Joseph's life? Why does God suddenly allow things from our past to be stirred up in our lives? Everything in your life is going fine. You've moved on. You finally have your feet under you. Then your ex-spouse shows up at church. Or your dad who was never much in your life growing up suddenly starts calling. He now wants a relationship with you. Or a super needy person with whom you felt like "I've drawn some boundaries. I've finally escaped." A super needy person, a sibling, an old friend, a relative says, "Hey, I'm moving to Columbus and I wondered if I might be able to stay with you for a while while I look for a job?"

Maybe it's not another person that is suddenly thrust back into your life. Maybe it's a reminder of a certain behavior. You see something in your child's life that was an issue that you dealt with in the past. You kept this issue secret. You kept it buried. So buried that you may as well have named it "Manasseh, God made me forget".

Why does God allow things to suddenly erupt in our lives? Because the truth is, friends, we can't just move on. There's an old adage:

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Hurt people hurt people.

We know that Joseph's past wasn't healed. It was just below the surface. When his brothers show up so does all of his old anger. He has fantasies of revenge. He puts them through the ringer, requiring one of his brothers to stay behind in jail. **Hurt**

**people hurt people.** Have you ever seen this in yourself or in someone else? An overreaction to something small that is said or done. Have you ever been with someone who is triggered by an innocent comment you made? It wasn't quite right, but it was a small thing. But created a huge explosion.

Do you know anyone who because of their prior woundedness continually acts out of that woundedness, interpreting every gesture, every word through the prism of their own pain? Why does God allow stuff to suddenly come up in our lives? Because hurt people hurt people. God doesn't just want your whole heart. God wants your heart whole!

How do we get whole? Here's what we read:

Slide Genesis 45:1-7

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. <sup>2</sup>And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it.

<sup>3</sup>Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.

<sup>4</sup>Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! <sup>5</sup>And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. <sup>6</sup>For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. <sup>7</sup>But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

All of this emotional turmoil is just below the surface for Joseph. All this pain and grief that was buried suddenly comes up. How do we overcome family mess? Don't just move on, but...

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Allow God into your past

Bring your emotions to God. Tell God about what was done to you, what your family was like, what you experienced. Invite him into the mess instead of trying to deal with it yourself. God gives Joseph an entirely new perspective. He speaks to Joseph and says, "You know what? I can use this mess and transform the garbage in your life into gold."

Here's what we read:

Slide Genesis 45:5

<sup>5</sup> And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.

Slide Genesis 45:7

<sup>7</sup> But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

You intended to hurt me, but God had a different purpose. How do we overcome family mess? First, don't just move on. Second, allow God into your past. By the way, you don't need to be on your own confronting your past and bringing God into it. We have an incredible ministry here at Vineyard Called Support for Life.

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Dave Kuta

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<https://www.vineyardcolumbus.org/ministries/support-for-life/about>

We have dozens of groups for healing wounds from your past. This includes:

Hearts Restored – for women who have suffered sexual betrayal

Roots – a recovery group for those with addictions

Not alone – for men who have suffered past sexual abuse

And we have a Friday night meeting every week of the year called Celebrate Recovery that deals with hurts, habits, and hang-ups.

Again, God doesn't just want your whole heart, God wants your heart whole. Here's the third thing,

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Get a new family

You say, "My family is all messed up." God says, "Together we're going to deal with that – all the pain and craziness of your family. But I've got something good in store for you. You can have a new family."

J.I. Packer, one of the great Christian writers of the last generation said,

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What is a Christian? The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God for his father.

He went on to say,

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If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much [they] make of the thought of being God's child, and having God as [their] father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls [their] worship and prayers and [their] whole outlook on life, everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new, and better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. "Father" is the Christian name for God.

The amazing, revolutionary thing that Jesus taught about God is something that we frequently overlook because of our overfamiliarity with it in church and, in part, in the western world. Jesus, so far as we know, was the first major religious teacher in all of history who ever addressed God as Father, in his personal prayers. And he's the first religious teacher in all of history who taught his followers to relate to God as Father. 175 times in the gospels, Jesus calls God "Father".

It is an extraordinary thing to be able to call God Father. It's not automatic just by being a human being. Being adopted into God's family is the result of choosing to trust in Jesus and receive him into your life as Lord.

The Apostle John says this,

Slide John 1:12

<sup>12</sup> Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—

Likewise, the Apostle Paul said this

Slide Galatians 3:26

<sup>26</sup> So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,

The way we become sons and daughters of God and have God as our Father is by choosing to trust in God's eternal Son, Jesus Christ. Becoming a part of God's family, being adopted as a son or daughter is a privilege. It goes beyond simply being born again, being regenerated by faith.

One can imagine a world in which God made spiritually dead people spiritually alive; aware of his presence; able to worship him and receive him. And yet, not adopt those born again people into his family. Angels are spiritually alive, but they are not part of the family of God and nowhere does an angel call God "Father". Only we human beings who have placed our trust in Jesus get to call God "Father" because God adopts us. For those of us who receive Jesus and believe in his name, God adopts us into his family. Adoption goes beyond being born again.

And adoption even goes beyond being justified by faith. Again, it's not hard to imagine a world in which God would set people in the right with himself and grant them a verdict over their lives as not guilty. But he doesn't need to put us in his family. Many judges in a criminal case might say about a defendant, "You are not guilty." But that's a far cry from saying, "And oh, by the way, I want to adopt you, criminal, into my family and make you my daughter or my son."

A Christian is someone who is adopted into a new family. We have God as our Father and the church as our brothers and sisters. Church isn't just a place we go, a building we show up at on the weekends. Church most often in the New Testament is referred to as a family. It's in this new family with God as our Father that we can find healing from family mess. Because our new family ought to operate with new rules. Not the 10 commandments of dysfunctional family, but the new rules of our father God and our brother Jesus.

New rules about money. It's not the ultimate source of our security. God is. Self-worth doesn't have to be determined by your net worth. New rules about conflict. You can forgive others because God in Jesus Christ has forgiven you. New rules about achievement. You don't have to achieve in order to be loved. We can be loved just as we are with all of our flaws. New rules about relationships. You can learn to trust people. You don't have new rules about feelings. You are allowed to have negative feelings. And best of all, new rules about God. God will never leave you. He will never abandon you. He always loves you and will receive you whenever you choose to turn to him.

Gospel Call

## **CLOSING**

Please stand. [Ministry Time]

I want to invite your Campus Pastor back up to continue this time of prayer and worship. Bless you all, and have a great week!

- I. Family mess is everywhere in the Bible
- II. Family rules impact everything in our lives
- III. Family mess is overcome every day in Christian experience
  - A. Don't just move on
  - B. Allow God into your past
  - C. Get a new family