

(PP1) Genesis 29:15-28

“Desert Dynasty Dynamic”

I want you to picture in your mind an extended family where all the men dress kind of scruffily, and have long hair, and beards of biblical proportions. Because of their appearance, a security guard tried to have them removed from an event, not realizing they were the *featured guests*. On another occasion, although they are quite wealthy, their appearance led a well-meaning passerby to offer them “meal money.”

One of these bearded men called their experience “facial profiling.” Any guesses as to who I am talking about? Yes, I am talking about the men of *Duck Dynasty*, the Robertson family, whose A & E show is the most popular non-scripted reality-TV program in the history of cable television.

If you haven’t seen it, the show is about the various escapades of the Robertson family, including hunting, fishing, running their duck-hunting-supplies business, and engaging in a lot of buffoonery.

Beyond all of that, however, the show is about being a family. Episodes end with scenes such as the clan gathered around the dinner table, with the patriarch, Phil, offering thanks for God’s grace in their lives. The family is openly Christian, and its members are regular churchgoers, so closing lines of the show are often about something inspirational.

For example, one episode last year concluded with a voice-over of one of the men saying, “Nobody drives us crazy like our own family. They’re odd, they push our buttons, they’re the source of our biggest frustrations, but also our greatest joy. It’s not always going to run smoothly, and we’re not always going to agree, but, in the end, we’re a family first.” Sounds a lot like a church doesn’t it?

Since the show's producers sometimes suggest ideas or setups for the episodes, the series is perhaps more "guided reality" than actual reality, but people familiar with the family say that what we see on the show is essentially who the Robertsons are. (PP2) If that is true, rather than calling them a "functional" family, we could say that they are an "extended family with a dynamic that *works*."

The opposite of this would be what we refer to as a *dysfunctional* family – a family that is deeply troubled, with adults who consistently fail to fulfill their family responsibilities. These are people who have hit rock bottom, and are still digging. Speaking of dysfunctional families, Rodney Dangerfield once said "Thanksgiving is all about getting your entire dysfunctional family under the same roof, and hoping the police don't get called."

In one of his stand up comic routines, Jeff Foxworthy said, "If you ever start feeling like you have the goofiest, craziest, most dysfunctional family in the world, all you have to do is go to a state fair. Five minutes at the fair, and you'll be saying "You know, we're alright. Heck, we're dang near royalty."

When people label their families as dysfunctional, often what they are trying to say is that some dynamics between family members *don't work* effectively. Or, some of the family dynamics actually get in the way of things working well.

For example, a particular family might not be very good at handling schedule conflicts, but may be quite good at supporting one another emotionally. Another family may not be very good at emotional support, but let one member of the family become seriously ill or badly injured, and everybody pulls together to take care of things.

Truth is, before any of us stamp our families as "dysfunctional," we should first try to complete this statement: "One thing that my family does pretty well is and fill in the blank."

All families at one time or another can seem pretty messed up, and we especially see this in our Scripture lesson concerning Jacob and his family. (PP3) I want to take a moment to briefly look at Jacob's family dynamic. Jacob has already screwed things up in his own family by deceiving his father, Isaac and stealing his brother's birthright. He then runs away to hide out at his Uncle Laban's until Esau has cooled off.

He soon falls in love with his cousin, Rachel, Laban's second daughter, and "earns" her hand in marriage by working for Laban for seven year. On the wedding night, however, Uncle Laban sends his oldest, less attractive daughter Leah, into Jacob's tent and marriage bed, and Jacob doesn't discover this deception until morning – don't even ask me how that happened!

Jacob is furious, but agrees to work another seven years, and a week later, he is allowed to marry Rachel. Then, the baby wars begin!! The story goes on to tell us that Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah." (v. 30) But, in a twist of irony, Leah – the unloved, less-attractive, older cousin – is the "fertile cousin," and she produces four sons just like that, while Rachel is barren.

Leah rejoices in the births of her sons, thinking perhaps this will make Jacob love her, but it doesn't. While Leah's busy producing son after son, Rachel feels left out. She envies her sister and blames her husband. Finally, Rachel offers her maid to Jacob, to bear children on her behalf. When the maid begins to bear children for Rachel, Leah decides to give her maid to Jacob, to bear children on her behalf.

As the competition continues, Rachel finally conceives and gives birth to a son. But instead of rejoicing in this, Rachel names him "Joseph," which means, "He adds." This was Rachel's way of saying she is not satisfied, and wants God to add yet another son to her account. Rachel's second pregnancy does not occur until several years later, and in the end, she dies in childbirth. Sounds like a soap opera, doesn't it? Would you all call this family a bit "dysfunctional?"

(PP4) Notice the unhappy, and unhealthy, family dynamic. Instead of bringing joy to the family, childbearing becomes a contest. The wives' behavior patterns don't accomplish their intended ends – which was to win the love of their husband. But because the sisters know no other way, they just continue in the same poor behavior patterns.

One of the key parts of dysfunction is that *people tend to repeat patterns of behavior that just don't work*. Perhaps Jacob's family can teach us a few useful things to consider when our own families aren't running as smoothly as we'd like.

(PP5) 1. It is helpful for us to realize that our family is a system. When a problem occurs within a family, we often view it as caused by one person, and, thus, the solution would seem to be to “fix” that single individual, while the rest of family continues on as before. There are, of course, troubled families where one person's behavior is the major source of the problem. But given how family members are intertwined, looking at the family as a unit is often helpful.

If, in Jacob's family, we were going to counsel someone, who would it be? Should it be Leah, concerning her desperate attempts to win her husband's affection? Or should it be Rachel, concerning her resentment of her sister? Maybe it should be Jacob, for his callousness toward Leah? Or the two maids, for whatever role their attitudes brought to the family? Or maybe even the sons, who, as they grew, started to side with their respective mothers?

In this case, a counselor might want to deal with the family as a whole, for even if the dysfunction is initially caused by one individual, other family members often become involved *by the way they respond*. Much family counseling is based on the idea that relationships are a more important factor in the behavior of people than just individual experience.

What this means is that you are not only an individual, whose behavior has personal consequences; you are also a component of your family

system, where your behavior has additional consequences as the rest of the family deals with it.

When we notice unhelpful patterns of behavior being repeated in our families, it is wise to examine our contribution to the pattern. Do we tend to initiate it? Does something we say or do contribute to the repetition of the pattern? Because families are systems, changing the way we respond, or responding in a non-pattern way, can oftentimes improve the health of the family system.

(PP6) 2. Families *have strengths and weaknesses, or both helpful and unhelpful patterns of behavior*. This, too, is illustrated in Jacob's family. The "who-can-have-the-most-babies" contest was an unhelpful and troublesome pattern of behavior. We may have unhelpful patterns of behavior in our families as well - behaviors related to sex, or chronic money mismanagement.

There may be one family member who always seems to get "sick" every time the family is at a crossroad, or one family member who is prone to throw tantrums, act out, or who always flies into a rage. One family member may always rely on others to bail them out, or blames others for his or her problems. During family troubles, it is often useful to examine what unhelpful, or troublesome patterns of behavior, are being repeated.

(PP7) 3. Despite all the pressures, many families, even those with problem patters of behavior, *are often the best problem-solving units*. Later in Jacob's story, God tells Jacob to leave his uncle's family and return to his homeland. His uncle tries to put obstacles in his way, but Jacob's wives *pull together and become an effective problem-solving unit to make the break happen* (see Genesis 31).

(PP8) And 4, *Home is where we usually learn about love*. We spend far more time in our families than we will ever spend in church. Even if we're receiving no formal religious training at home, *home is still the*

place where most of us learn what it means to love and be loved. When you come to church and hear about the love of God, one reason you are able to understand it is because you've been loved at home.

So, what is your family dynamic? To paraphrase the *Duck Dynasty* guys, "Nobody drives us crazy like our own family. They're odd, they push our buttons, they're the source of our biggest frustrations, but they are oftentimes the source of our greatest joy. It is not always going to run smoothly, and we're not always going to agree, but, in the end, if real love is present, our family is the place to be."

May God bless you all, Amen.

him Rachel, too.