

Family Feuds: How to Respond

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Do you dread family get-togethers and vacations? Do you often regret the way you talk and act around your family? Do you avoid your family? Maybe some of these words sound familiar to you:

“I’m a grown woman, but I act like a child around my family and bicker with everyone.”

“I know it shouldn’t bother me, but my parents always favor my brother over me.”

“My parents still tell me what to do, even though I’m 40 years old!”

“My sister isn’t speaking to me, but she’s sure talking about hem.”

“My childhood was so hurtful that I can’t imagine having a relationship with my parents now.”

“My family is out of control. Their behavior is so destructive that I don’t want my children to be around them.”

If you have a hard time relating to your family, you have plenty of company. Many people have a difficult time dealing with the family they grew up in. Why is it so hard to get along with your family? Deep hurts from your childhood, unrealistic expectations, and old patterns resurfacing are just some of the reasons you might find yourself feuding with your family. Is it possible to love in the midst of these challenges? Yes, with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26). Change begins with taking an honest look at your family and yourself, hearing what God has to say about your struggles, and then trusting Jesus to help you love in a difficult situation.

Every Family is Flawed

What were your parents like as you grew up? Warm? Gentle? Encouraging? Distant? Passive? Abusive? What kind of family did you grow up in? Safe? Secure? Nurturing? Violent? Broken? Evil? There are as many different kinds of families as there are different people.

But one thing is true of every family: Each one is flawed. None of us grew up with perfect parents or perfect siblings, and none of us were perfect children. Your parents and siblings sinned against you, and you sinned against them. This truth is not meant to excuse or minimize the evil and abuse that happens in some families; instead, it’s a reminder that we all need God to be at work in our family relationships. He is the only one who can redeem family

relationships broken by sin, and give you the grace to respond to your parents and siblings with wisdom and love.

Flawed Families Need God's Grace

Read almost any Bible story and you will realize that God is very familiar with flawed family dynamics. King David, one of the greatest heroes in the Bible, was also the father of a dysfunctional family. His son, Absalom, conspired to murder him and take over as king, and David had to fight for his life against his own son. Despite his son's treachery, David wanted to protect Absalom; and when he was killed, David suffered deeply.

But human sin is no match for God's grace, and God still used David and his family in his kingdom. The psalms David wrote as he suffered have been used by God to bring comfort to his people for centuries. And from David's family came Jesus Christ, the Savior of the whole world and the only one who can help us love our families. Your family, just like David's family, needs God's grace. Only God can bring redemption to flawed people and families.

Your Family of Origin Does Not Determine Your Identity

Not only are family sins redeemed by God's grace, so is our family background. We often assume that those who grow up in a "good" family will turn out "good," and those who grow up in a "bad" family will turn out "bad." It's true that we can see their mark on us in good and bad ways. But your identity and future is not determined by your family of origin. Many people who grew up in good families where there was lots of encouragement and nurture have turned out quite differently from their families. And many people who grew up in horrific families have turned out to be kind, humble servants who are a blessing to those around them.

Often when we have a bad experience (like growing up in an abusive family), we let that experience define us and become our identity. But when you come to Jesus in faith, He gives you His life and a whole new identity as a child of God. Of course you are still shaped by your experience, but you are not defined by it. Your identity is no longer determined by your family of origin, but by who you are in Christ. As you depend on God for your Identity, He will make it possible for you to change the way you relate to your family.

God's Call to Love Includes Your Family

If you have grown up in a very difficult family where parents and siblings have actively sought to harm you and where harmful behavior was the norm, don't despair. God is not shocked; He knows all about dysfunctional families and the hurt and sorrow you feel. He is not distant, silent, or passive. He wants to

redeem your troubled family relationships, and He is calling you to be a part of that redemption by loving your family. Jesus calls you to love your neighbor as yourself, and that includes those who are acting like your enemies (Matthew 4:43-48; Luke 10:25-37).

How does Jesus help you love those who are so close to you and often so hurtful? He starts by saying some surprising things about how we are to relate to our families. Notice these startling words:

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them He said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."
(Luke 14:25-27)

You might be thinking, *How can this passage help me love my family? It seems like Jesus is encouraging me to hate my family!* But Jesus isn't saying that you are to actively hate your parents. Telling you to hate your family would contradict other parts of the Bible where Jesus calls us to love others, even our enemies. It also would be a violation of the fifth commandment that calls us to honor our parents and provide for our families (1 Timothy 5:8). So what does He mean?

We get some help by comparing this passage to what Jesus says on the same subject in Matthew:

"Anyone who loves his father or mother *more than* me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter *more than* me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."
(Matthew 10:37-39, italics added)

Notice that Jesus is using comparative language (*more than*) to contrast our love for Him to our love for family. He is not saying we should hate our families. Instead, He is saying something quite radical; You can't be His disciple unless you treasure Him above everything else. Our love for Him must far surpass our love for anything or anyone else – including family. Our devotion to Him should be so unique that all other loves look like hatred by comparison.

We all grew up in families where parents and siblings sinned against us and disappointed us. When our need for their approval is more important to us than our love for God, it's easy to hold grudges, get angry, and become bitter

when we are mistreated. But when God is first in our hearts, we can put their failures and sins into the bigger context of our primary relationship with God. Then we won't be eaten up by bitterness and disappointment. C.S. Lewis puts it this way:

When I have learnt to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now. Insofar as I learn to love my earthly dearest at the expense of God and instead of God, I shall not love my earthly dearest at all. When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased. (C.S. Lewis, Letters of C. S. Lewis (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), 11.)

Do you see what happens when you love God more than anything? You are free to really love the people in your life. You won't think less of your family; you will think more of them. Because their love and acceptance is not your ultimate goal, you won't be enslaved by your expectations for them and the disappointments that inevitably follow.

Jesus is calling you to turn from love of self to love for Him. Think about how Jesus has loved you - He lived the perfect life you should have lived, and He died the death you deserved. When you wake up every morning and interact personally with the One who has done all this for you, your family's slights and insults won't plague you in the same way.

This won't be automatic or easy. Jesus said that each of us must take up our cross every day (Luke 9:23). You must daily die to your self-centeredness by finding your identity in what Jesus has done for you in His life, death, and resurrection. As you do this every day, you will turn from making anything else in creation more important to you than the God who has rescued you from your self-centeredness. Growing as a disciple is gradual, in the same way that the crucifixion was slow and agonizing. As we die to self and embrace our new identity in Christ, God is slowly and patiently bringing us to the end of ourselves, so that He might fill us with the life of Christ.

Changed by the Cross of Christ

Being defined by Christ's grace and love and who you are in Him will gradually free you to love you family well. You will grow in your ability to let go of your expectations for your family. Humility will replace the demanding cry in your heart to have your family treat you in a certain way. Humility will replace self-righteousness as you acknowledge that you also are a sinner who has let others down. The temptation to look down on your parents and siblings will lessen, and your superiority complex will be replaced with a

willingness to see your own sins and faults. You will no longer be controlled by the pressure of living up to your parents' or family's expectations because your identity and foundation for living is found in Christ, not your family.

Practical Strategies for Change

Let's talk more specifically about how Christ's forgiving and enabling grace will help you love your family. What does loving your family look like when you are in the middle of a feud? How does the grace of Christ change us and what does that change look like?

Respond with Grace to Your Family

Living with a conscious understanding of who you are in Christ can practically impact the way you love your family. Think of it this way: If you are very poor and someone steals a dollar from you, you'd be very angry, and you'd try to make that person give your dollar back to you. But if you are a multi-millionaire and someone takes \$100 or even \$1000 from you, the offense, though real, doesn't sting like it would if you were very poor. In the same way, when you become a Christian you are a spiritual multi-millionaire a millions times over!

Because of what Jesus did for you through His life, death, and resurrection, God has poured an unlimited amount of grace, forgiveness, love, commitment, security, and commitment into your life. Your spiritual wealth puts all of the slights, unmet expectations, and hurts of parents and siblings in a totally new light. It doesn't mean you ignore or don't feel the hurts, but they pale in comparison to what you have been given in Christ. Because of who you are in Christ, you don't have to be overwhelmed and dominated by the sins and failures of your family. Instead, you will be free to share with them the same grace and mercy God has given to you.

If you grew up in a very abusive family, you will need wisdom to know how to go about sharing God's grace with your family. If you have concerns about your physical safety, you can still offer grace to your family; but in that case, moving toward them might mean simply forgiving them for what they have done and praying for God's grace to abound in their lives.

If your physical safety is not an issue, but your parents and siblings still are manipulative and controlling, you should still try to move toward them. But be wise in how you initiate communication. Please get advice and counsel from wise brothers and sisters in Christ to help you decide how to best love your family. Above all, be patient and consistent; know that your efforts to love others are never in vain. God will honor and bless your efforts.

Take Responsibility for Your Sins, Not Your Family's

Often in a family feud it's difficult to know which sins you should take responsibility for. This is especially true in an abusive family because the victims often blame themselves for the abuse. Be careful that you *don't* feel guilty for the abuse, but that you *do* own your response to the abuser. Is it possible you are so busy carrying the burden of your abuser's sin that you can't see your own? Do you struggle with self-righteousness, bitterness, anger, and paralyzing fear? Ask God to help you stop carrying the burden of your abuser's sins against you, and then ask Him to show you where you need to repent. Rely on the wisdom of other Christians. Ask a wise friend or pastor to help you decide where you may need to seek forgiveness for attitudes and actions that are sinful. You also need guidance and encouragement from others to help you deal in a godly way with the wrongs committed against you.

Become an Instrument of Grace

As Jesus builds in you're a new identity that is dependent on Him, not your family, you will see the Holy Spirit do amazing things through you. You will be able to forsake bitterness and disappointment, and replace them with acts of love and kindness that are simple and tangible. Perhaps God is calling you to do some of the things on the list below:

1. *Pray for your family.* Start by praying regularly for your family and for your relationship with them. Pray that the same grace that changed you will fill their lives. As you pray faithfully for them, you will find that God will make you the conduit of God's grace to them by helping you move toward them in new and surprising ways.
2. *Open up lines of communication.* Call home; write letters; remember birthdays and anniversaries. If abuse has been an issue, ask a wise friend to help you decide how to protect yourself as you reach out in love.
3. *Ask for forgiveness.* Every human relationship involves two sinners, so that means you probably need to ask at least one family member for forgiveness. Have you been antagonistic? Easily angered? Self-righteous? Go to the family member you have wronged and ask for their forgiveness.
4. *Don't take sides and be drawn into new family feuds.* Resist the temptation to go back to old patterns and ways of relating. Let your family know you have no interest in taking sides and gossiping about other family members. Instead, let your words and actions demonstrated to them that you care for them and want your

relationship with them to be close, but free of family politics. You may also want to tell them that you are praying for each of them.

5. *Don't take on the role of advising your parents how to parent your siblings.* It's tempting to take on the role of telling your parents how to parent other siblings, especially when your parents make unwise decision or show favoritism toward your brother or sister. Remember that God has given you clear responsibilities in your relationship with your parents; you are to pray for and honor them (Deuteronomy 5:16). But you're not responsible for making parenting decisions for them. When you know that God is working even in very messy family relationships and teaching you in the process, it helps you to be responsible, but not controlling. There may be times when it will be appropriate and loving to offer some helpful suggestions, but be careful not to do this in an overbearing and self-righteous way.
6. *Be creating in how you spend your time together.* Don't just settle for a relational detent when you are in one another's homes. Plan to do activities together where you are required to work together, plan together, and talk constructively. Can you visit places of interest together? Can you cooperate together on a project? How about working together around the house or in the garden? Be active, not passive, when you are together.

Make Wise Choices for Your Children

Your children's relationship with your parents and siblings requires the same kind of wisdom you need. But because they are younger and more vulnerable, it's your job to make wise choices for them. If you are concerned for their well-being when they are around your parents, you must be their protector and advocate. If there has been a history of abuse, you should be with your children whenever they see your family.

After you make sure they are safe, you can use the situation to help them learn to love difficult people. They will face many other difficult people throughout their lives, and now is an excellent time to teach them how to love others the way Christ loves them. If you are still struggling with exactly how your children should relate to your family, then ask a trusted friend or counselor to help you make a plan that will protect your children and also teach them the value of loving others through difficulty.

Persevere in Love

The Bible says that one of the key marks of growth in grace is persevering in doing the right things even when you are not being rewarded. So even if your

family is not responding to your attempts to love them, you need to keep on trying to love them well.

How you handle your family's lack of response will show you whether you are moving toward them out of genuine love or out of self-centeredness. In Ephesians 4:1-3, we are called to exhibit character qualities like humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearing love. Patience and forbearing love means you are willing to be humble and gentle for a really long time!

The sincerity of your love is tested in situations where the other person is not changing in the way you would like or as quickly as you would like. The two questions you need to ask in these situations are:

“God, what do You want to do in me?” And, “What is God seeking to do in me through this difficulty?” Even if your relationship with your family is never healed, God is still up to something. He wants you to depend on Him with your whole heart, and He wants to make you more like Himself. As you persevere in loving your family, you are allowing God to do this work in you.

Loving your family in these ways will mean dying to self-centeredness and growing in Christ-centeredness. As you pray and ask the Spirit of God to change you, old barriers you have erected between you and your family will come down. This will encourage your family members to take down the barriers they have put up.

As your love for God grows, your movement toward your parents and siblings will be wise. Instead of looking for their validation or approval you will love them sacrificially, the way Christ has loved you. You will be able to move toward them because God, in Christ, has moved toward you, and His love has been poured into your heart (Romans 5:5). God's love will flow from you into your relationship with your family. You can depend on the unfailing love of God to change you and your family.