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CONFLICT IN THE FAMILY

Today's text: Judges, Chaps. 19-21; Micah 7: 6

Extracts:

1. "For the son dishonoureth the father, the daughter riseth up against her mother; the daughter in law against her mother in law; a man's enemies are the men of his own house" [Micah 7:6]
2. "And the Levite, the husband of the woman that was slain, answered and said, I came into Gibeah that belongeth to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to lodge. And the men of Gibeah rose against me...and my concubine have they forced [*raped*], that she is dead...And the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, What wickedness is this that is done among you? Now therefore deliver us the men, ... that we may put them to death, and put away evil from Israel. But the children of Benjamin would not hearken to the voice of their brethren the children of Israel" [Judg. 20: 4-5, 12-13]

In the movie, Mad Love (1995), Matt (played by Chris O'Donnell) and Casey (Drew Barrymore) were two high school seniors who fell in love. Casey was a troubled teen that appropriately belonged to a psychiatric ward. Matt, on the other hand, was an honour student with a very bright future. In spite of advice and warnings from his father, Matt gave up school and preparation for college, including missing his SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) exam to pursue his dream lover. He smuggled her out of the hospital and both of them went on life-threatening escapades. Meanwhile, their parents were left in anguish. By the time that Matt recovered his senses to accept that Casey was in deed mad, he had lost so much time and opportunities.

How many families are currently passing through a similar conflict? Outright rebellion by children against their parents, domestic violence of husband against wife or children, infidelity, incest or promiscuity, drug and alcohol addiction, street gangs, juvenile delinquency, etc. It is a long list and families are in turmoil. No family is immune from attack for, as Jesus has warned about end times, "the brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child; and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death" [Matt. 10: 21]. Therefore, it is an issue that we need to seriously examine.

In today's lesson, we shall use the conflict among the children of Israel to study the problem and how to deal with it.

1. A brother's wife is raped by his brethren

A Levite had a common law wife (referred to as a concubine in the story) who was unfaithful to him. She ran away to her parents' home in Bethlehem-judah. However, because he loved her, he went after her to persuade her to return home [**Judg. 19: 1-3**]. He was well received by his father-in-law who entertained him with food and drinks, which forced him to stay longer than he had planned. However, by the evening of the fifth day, the Levite insisted on leaving, no matter how late. So, his father-in-law gave him and his wife provisions saddled on two asses and bade them safe journey [**vv. 4-10**].

By the time they came to Jebus [the section of Jerusalem occupied by the Jebusites], it was in deed very dark and they needed to sleep over. However, rather than lodge among strangers, they decided to move to Gibeah "which belongeth to Benjamin" [**vv. 11-14**]. Recall that Levi and Benjamin were two of the twelve sons of Jacob, the father of all the children of Israel. Therefore, as far as the Levite was concerned, he was going to lodge among his brothers. However, he got what he did not bargain for.

An old farmer who was returning late from his fields saw the Levite and his wife sleeping outside. As it turned out, he came from the same place as the Levite (Mount Ephraim) and he was sojourning in Gibeah. He offered his home to them for the night [**vv. 15-21**]. As they were trying to settle down, some "men of the city, certain sons of Belial" banged on the door demanding that the visitor be brought out for their pleasures. You recall what the people of Sodom and Gomorrah tried to do to the angels who came to Lot's house [**Gen. 19: 4-8**]? As in Lot's case, the host offered his daughter and the Levite's wife instead but the morally decadent men would not accept. Perhaps, out of frustration, the men seized the Levite's wife and raped her in turn all night. By early morning, she was dead! [**Judg. 19: 22-28**]

The Levite was so grieved that he cut his dead wife's body into 12 pieces and sent a piece to each of the 12 tribes of Israel to let them know what brethren had done to brethren saying, "behold, ye are all children of Israel; give here your advice and counsel" [**Judg. 20: 4-7**]. The elders sent to the children of Benjamin to surrender the culprits for punishment but they refused. Instead, they prepared for war against the rest of Israel [**vv. 11-15**].

It was a bitter war!

The children of Benjamin lined up 26,000 soldiers against 400,000 by the rest of Israel. Here is how the battles went [**vv. 17-48**]:

- 1) The army of Israel went to God's house to ask advice on which tribe to lead the fight [not whether they should fight at all!] and God told them to

put Judah in front. In that battle, the Benjamites crushed the rest of Israel, killing 22,000 of their men!

- 2) The children of Israel went back to God a second time and wept before Him all day, saying, "Shall I go up again to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother?" The Lord said that they should go. They did and lost 18,000 men!
- 3) Once again, they went to the Lord, "sat there before the Lord, and fasted that day until even, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord." This time, through Phinehas the priest, the son of Eleazar, they asked what they should have asked in the first place, whether they needed to fight against their brother, Benjamin. God replied, "Go up; for tomorrow I will deliver them into thine hand." In this battle, the children of Israel lost only 30 men but they killed 25,000 of the army of Benjamin. They went on to destroy every man and beast and burnt their cities. They even went on to swear that they would never allow their daughters to marry any of the men of Benjamin in the future.

2. Lessons

See how costly conflict in the family can be? Lives and reason were lost. Relationships were hurt, if not permanently. Therefore, it is important to understand what can cause conflict in the family as a basis for knowing how to deal with it. Here are some possible causes:

a) *Sin*

Sin is a major source of conflict in the family. In the story above, the wife of a family member was raped and yet, the people did not allow the offenders to be brought to justice. David's son, Amnon, committed incest with his half-sister, Tamar. That led to a major conflict in David's house, leading to the murder of Amnon by Tamar's brother, Absalom [**2 Sam. 13: 1-32**].

In several families that we may know, there are stories of immorality, disrespect and disobedience of constituted authority. Parents do not pay sufficient attention to the spiritual upbringing of their children all in the name of democracy and freedom. The children gain access to pornographic materials on cable television or the Internet. Their parents do not show any good example either. In some cases, the children see their mothers changing men like clothes and their fathers treating women like fashion. There are no defined standards of acceptable conduct except those that the children have access to in the atheist-dominated mass media. In the end, the children carry guns to school to shoot their teachers and fellow students. Unwanted pregnancies, HIV/AIDS and other consequences abound.

b) *God's punishment*

Sometimes, the cause(s) and course of conflict may not be apparent to the naked eye. For example, it is not apparent why the children of Israel who had gone to avenge the injustice against the Levite were themselves defeated twice by the offending Benjamites. The fact is that they were themselves not any better than the offenders. They were themselves disobedient and idolatrous people who had corrupted God's law. So, they were not in the position to cast the first stone since they were not any better. After David had committed adultery and murder, God punished him saying, "The sword shall *never* depart from thine house... Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house" [2 Sam. 12: 10-11]. What followed? There was incest, as we saw earlier. His son, Absalom rebelled against him, forcing David to go into exile [2 Sam. 15: 1-23]. The young man went on to sleep with some of his father's wives in full view of the public as the Lord had pronounced [2 Sam. 16: 22; 2 Sam. 12: 11]. In David's old age, another son, Adonija, attempted to crown himself his father's successor [1 Kgs 1:5-9].

How do we know that the current conflict in our families is not God's punishment for some sins committed by our ancestors for He visits "the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me" [Ex. 20: 5]?

c) *Envy*

Envy means unjustified resentment of people who are better than we are. Envy is as much in the family as it is outside. For example, sibling rivalry can lead to family conflict. Those little remarks that we make about our family members that make us proud can breed envy in those that give us problems. Cain killed his brother Abel because "the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering; But unto Cain and to his offering He had not respect. *And Cain was very wrath, and his countenance fell*" [Gen. 4: 4-5]. Jacob (Israel) loved Joseph more than all his children "and he made him a coat of many colours. *And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him and could not speak peaceably unto him*" [Gen. 37: 3-4]. Therefore, we may need to watch our mannerism when we are among family members.

d) *Selfishness*

When we do not care about other family members' welfare or feelings, we can do certain things against them without counting the hurt that we are causing. The Prodigal Son did not care whether his father was dead or alive. All he wanted was his share of the inheritance to be paid to him in advance [Lk 15: 12]. That was why when he returned broke and broken,

his elder brother was angry with his father for “these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment; *and yet thou never gavest me a kid that I might make merry with my friends*” [vv. 28-29].

Some of us parents belong to the generation that took care of their own parents as well as their own children. However, their grown-up children would rather put their parents in nursing homes than let them “stain” their own homes. They may not feel any sense of responsibility towards them, claiming rather that they did not ask to be born into this world. Therefore, their parents should bear the absolute responsibility to bring them up! Should the parents react early enough by putting plans in place for their retirement age, the children’s education and future could be jeopardized. Such selfish considerations breed conflict in the family.

3. Dealing with the situation

In the Levite’s case that we have studied above, we can see two ways of dealing with the situation. The first part involves dealing with the problem that has been created [*treatment*]. The second is to avoid the recurrence of the problem [*prevention*].

a) *Treating the problem*

Conflict is inevitable, but how should we deal with it? The children of Israel tried to deal with the problem by asking the children of Benjamin to hand over the criminals to them for justice. Unfortunately, they refused to do so. More unfortunately, the whole family [both sides] went into a war in which thousands of lives were lost. There has to be a better way!

In **Matthew 18: 15-17**, Jesus Christ has set out how to handle such a situation in the following words:

If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the elders of the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen and a publican.

Applied to the family, it means that the offended party should first try to deal with the matter one-on-one with the offender. When that fails, other members of the family can be brought in for “a brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city: and their contentions are like the bars of castles” [**Prov. 18: 19**]. If that fails to resolve it, then the whole family

[parents and children plus the larger family, depending on your cultural practices] can come in. Where that fails, then the matter has to be left in God's hands.

In resolving the conflict, it is important to uphold the truth and principles because "he that justifieth the wicked and he that condemneth the just, even they both are abomination to the Lord" [**Prov. 17:15**]. Placate the offended party (apology from the offender is very helpful here) but rehabilitate the offender. That is the only ground for making it easy for the offence to be forgiven and forgotten.

b) *Preventing the problem*

Any family that has experienced a conflict will admit that its sad effects can linger for quite a long time. After Jacob had died, his children were still afraid that Joseph might still avenge their criminal acts against him. So they went to Joseph "and fell down before his face and they said, behold we be thy servants. And Joseph said unto them, fear not; for am I in the place of God?" [**Gen. 50: 15-21**]. Therefore, the best thing is to prevent it from happening in the first place.

One way to prevent it is *a solid spiritual foundation* because if you "train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it" [**Prov. 22:6**]. A house is built through wisdom, established by understanding and filled with all precious and pleasant riches by knowledge [**Prov. 24: 3-4**]. Wisdom, knowledge and understanding are gifts of the Holy Spirit [**1 Cor. 12: 8**]. When the Spirit of God rules a home, then the following blessings follow: husbands love their wives who in turn respect their husbands [**Eph. 5: 25; 1 Pet. 3: 1-8**], parents do not provoke their children to wrath but raise them "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," and children honour and obey their parents as well as respect one another [**Eph. 6: 1-4**].

4. Conclusion

In the modern society that is ruled by satanic forces, the family has become an endangered species. God made Adam and Eve but we now hear of marriages between "Adam and Steve" or "Diana and Eve." The normal family is plagued by separation or divorce, immorality or spiritual wickedness and such like things. If the family is in conflict, so will the church but, "behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" [**Ps. 133:1**]. Don't give up on your family. Fight for it.