

Section 1 of 3 [00:00:00 - 00:10:04] (NOTE: speaker names may be different in each section)

Paul: Family, we're going to talk about families today. If you are new with us, you weren't here last week, we just launched a new sermon series called "The Family Feud." We're talking about what it means to fight with your family.

It's inevitable sometimes, as much as we love our family, families are not perfect. You know that, because when you grew up, the only perfect family was not yours. It was someone else's. The only perfect father was not yours. It was always someone else's. The only perfect mother was not yours, always someone else's. When you had children, you discover very, very quickly that the only perfect children are certainly not yours, always someone else's.

Families are tough, yet families are designed by God as the unit through which we are born into the world and to be nurtured. But they don't always work out. They don't always work out. There's a lot of pain. There's a lot of dysfunction. Family relationships are fragile, and I'm not telling you anything you don't know, but we'll talk a little bit more about it today. It's easy sometimes for working relationships and families to go from working to fully broken very, very quickly.

I've noticed that sometimes with weddings, for example. Weddings, you think about this in this context. A man and a woman will come down, and at this altar, will profess their love for each other, so much so, "I don't love anybody in the world more than you. I want to spend my life only with you. You're the one I love the most." The same two people that before God and everybody that professed their undying love for each other, in no short order sometimes, hate each other more than anyone else in the world. How does that swing happen? How can we do that? How do we go from love, love, love, love, love to broken, broken, broken?

You know, because it happens in your family. It certainly happened in mine. When I was a child, I wanted to be like my father. I had a wonderful father. He was a talented minister. He was a minister, and he changed people's lives. He was very charismatic. He was innovative. He was really innovative, very creative, had a ton of fun. Wherever you went with my father, you were guaranteed to have energy and fun. Whatever church he was involved in, there was always a lot of life and vitality, and a lot of growth. It was fun and dynamic to be around my dad's churches. I would watch him influence people, and I would think, "I want to be like him. I want to help people the way he helped."

This is interesting. At the same time he was a minister ... It's kind of hard to believe, you couldn't do this in today's world, but at the same time he was a minister, he was also the local weatherman. He the local weatherman for the ... I'm not making this up. This is not like preacher's embellishment. He was the full, I'd say he was a meteorologist, but he didn't have a meteorology degree, he just had a personality. But he did the weather at 6:00 and 10:00 for the big ABC affiliate in Shreveport every day. This would be like if Pete Delkus was your pastor. That was my dad. He had a talk show, kind of like Oprah, a 30-minute talk show that he would interview people. My dad was a charming guy, and everywhere he went, people wanted to

be around him.

I watched him, and I thought, "That, I want to be like him," until, until, until a series of shortcomings, call them sins, whatever you want, a series of affairs. We talk about this publicly all the time, so a series of affairs, a series of addictions, a series of very public failings, a series of very embarrassing activities. I went from, "I will do anything to be like him," to "I don't want to have anything to do with him. I want him out of my life." How does that happen?

I decided I was going to detach. Where I wanted to be with my dad every waking second, suddenly I didn't want to be around my dad at all. In fact, when he eventually moved out of Shreveport, confessionally I'm embarrassed to say this, I was glad. I thought, "Ah, he's gone. Geographically I don't have to fool with him ever again.

But come on, we talked about this last week. It's family. You can't detach. You want to detach, but you can't detach. It's not that you can't detach because there's a rule again detaching. You can't detach, because you cannot detach. That's your father, no matter what. That's your mom forever. That's your son. That's your daughter. That's your uncle. No matter how bad it gets, that ember is always burning in you, and in them, to restore things. The ember may be faint. You may not be able to see the ember. It may be smothered under a bunch of pain, but family is family. Family is the unit that God brought us into the world through.

I would try to double back and think, "Okay, I'll give it another shot. Messed up, but I'll double back. One more rehab. I'll go to family week, that's fine. I'll show up. We do it again. There'd be one more family week. There'd be one more family meeting, one more gathering, one more new start, one more list of promises, I'll never, or I'll start, or I'm going to, or I promise." And we'd fail. I'd say, "That's it," and I'd try it again. And I'd say, "That's it," until one day I said, "You know what? That's really it." At least I tried to say it, "That's it. I won't do that ever again. This is a losing battle. This is never going to work."

My hunch is you have people in your life like that. It may not be that extreme. It may not be that extreme, but you've got somebody in your life like that right now. A child that went prodigal, and they've something. They got some behavior. They married somebody, or they did something, and you're done. Or a spouse, maybe an ex-spouse, we're done. We had all these kids together, but I will never, ever, ever again. You are done. Some of you have siblings, and you wouldn't articulate it like this, but you haven't reached out to them in years, because there was that thing they did in 1997 at that party, and remember it was so embarrassing, and the way they treated your kids.

We want to detach, and we convince ourselves this is a losing battle. You don't agree with how they live, and you don't agree with who they live, with or what they do, or who they do it with, or where they do it. You don't agree with anything about them. You've asked yourself, "Is this feud even worth having?" It's a losing

battle. They don't see the world the way you see it. You convince yourself it's never going to change, they're never going to change. You wonder if you should just quit.

My question to you this morning, and one I hope you'll wrestle with today and maybe throughout the week is, "Are there losing battles in your life that are still worth fighting for?" Losing battles, they're probably not ever going to be right, but are they worth fighting for anyway? The challenge as people of faith, and if you're here today and you're not a Christian, maybe you'll find what we say practical, but really to some degree, you're off the hook. If you've come down here and you said, "No, I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior," there's a challenge. There's a challenge. We have this thing called scripture that gets in the way. We have this Savior called Jesus that gets in the way.

Today, I'm just warning you, it's a challenging passage. You're going to read it, and it's going to seem light-hearted, and you think it's not very challenging until you read it again. You may just go away thinking, "That's one of the more challenging passages that I have ever encountered." You're not going to really know what to do with it, but maybe it will help. It comes to us from Matthew 18. In your bulletin, it says Matthew 8. It's not, it's Matthew 18. It's the right passage, it's just the wrong number. It's Matthew 18. Matthew 18 is like a whole series of Jesus's talks about Christian ethics when it comes to relationships. You want to know how to act with other people in your life, particularly those you love, you ought to read through all of Matthew 18.

In Matthew 18:15, listen, this is Jesus talking now, and he understands that sometimes families go south, and sometimes people do things to us that harm us, and we just want to detach. We think it's not worth fighting. It's a losing battle. I'm done. Jesus tries to give us a little template here, maybe to help us out. He starts out this. He says, "Look, if your brother or sister," and you can pull that word out. You can put uncle, you can put father, you can put son, daughter. It doesn't matter. "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault just between the two of you. And if they listen to you, then congratulations, you've won them over."

This is where it all starts, but this is important. This is deeper than you think. Go and point out their fault. Go and point out their fault. A) you have to put all that angst that you have into words. This is real important. We don't want to do that. We don't want to articulate. We don't conflict. We don't want to articulate. No, no, you have to articulate. You have to put it in words, "This is how I feel. This is how I've been hurt. This is what happens when you do that." You have to put it in words. If you don't, you know what you do. Come on, you just stew about it. You just convince yourself it'll go away. You jam it down in your belly, and it just sits there, and it just gets toxic.

Jesus says, "No, you got to go, but you got to go and point out," and that's the second thing. You got to go, you got to do it in person. This isn't about the written word. You got to articulate it in words, but then you got to go and point out. Let me tell you, I'm serious about this. If somebody asks me, "Paul, you can only be in

ministry one more day, what would you want the congregation to know?"

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Paul Rasmussen: Paul, you can only be in ministry one more day, what would you want the congregation to know? Number one, without arguing, I'd say I want everybody to enter into a full and meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. That's it. If I only had one message, that would be it, but if I got two messages, and I'm dead serious, I would tell everybody stop fighting with your family by text. That's all I got. Right? Stop it. You're laughing because you do it and you're all amped up with super courage, right, ya-ba-ba-ba, and you've got the greatest nuclear weapon of all; capital letters, to show them how mad you are.

Jesus understood how deadly this was. This isn't about the written word. This is about the spoken word. This is about sitting down, face to face, and saying, "Mom, I have a problem when you do this. Dad, it really hurts when you do this." Is it tough? Absolutely, but Jesus says this is the first step. If your brother or sister sins, quit texting, call them up, sit down with them, put it in words, get it off your chest and let them know about it. The spoken word has the potential to settle it. The written word, I'm telling you, will only exacerbate it. I wish you could see the volume of file folders that you all bring me and say, "Paul, I printed them all up, all the texts. I've got them right here. Look what she said. She said this and I want to show the text." I say, have you ever, did you sit down with them? No, no. Okay. Matthew 18, go talk to them.

Jesus is a pragmatist, though, he knows it doesn't always work. In fact, it may never work, but maybe there's more to the relationship at stake here. Maybe there's your peace of mind. Maybe that's what Jesus is getting at. He's a pragmatist. He goes on, Verse 16, but if they don't listen, knowing full well they might not listen or might not change. If they will not listen after a private meeting fails, take one or two others along so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. Now don't over-complicate this. You know what that means? Get somebody else in the room. A counselor. A pastor. A wise friend. Somebody neutral. Somebody to help can facilitate the dialogue. If you tried it on your own, but you lost courage or you couldn't get the words out or it didn't work or they didn't listen, that's okay. Jesus says I understand that. That's step one, but let me tell you step two. Bring somebody else with you. Call the counselor. Say we need to come in and work this out because your story is usually not neutral, is it? Sometimes you need an observer, a facilitator. Jesus is a pragmatist. You've done counseling 57 times, Paul, and nothing has changed. Okay, Jesus gets that, Verse 17.

If they still refuse to listen tell it to the Church. Let me clarify this because a lot of churches abuse this privilege. You have an affair and they put it up on their website to call you out. No, no, no, no. Come on. This is Jesus talking. When Jesus was talking there was no "Church," so either Jesus didn't say this or he did say it, which I believe, and he meant something a little bit different. Maybe the Greek word will

help us out. It's ecclesia and it simply means fellowship. This just means the intimate group of people that you disciple with, that you do life with. That's why we encourage you to be in a small group. This isn't about your church posting all your shortcomings on the website to shame you into being sin free. No, no, no, no, no.

This is about sitting down with the people that love you the most, that care about you, that hold you accountable. We tried it together, we tried it with a counselor. We've got to broaden the pot a little bit. Do it with the people that you fellowship with. Jesus is a pragmatist. You tried step one. You tried step two. You brought it to your Sunday school group. You brought it to your Bible study. You brought it to your small group, whatever. If they refuse to listen, even to the church, then treat them ... Okay, here we go, treat them as you would a Pagan or a tax collector.

At last, we think, whew, finally Jesus is on board. He knows I have tried everything I can try. This is never going to work. Okay. I can treat them like a tax collector or a Pagan. Now, if you're new to the Bible or new to church, let me just remind you in the scriptures there are sinners, there are really, really bad sinners and then there are tax collectors. Right? It is literally its own category of sin. It is the most egregious kind of sinner, Biblically, there is. This is like the worst of the worst. We think, ah, liberty. I can treat the crazy uncle like a Pagan or a tax collector. I can write him off. I can indict him and I can tell everybody else about how bad they are, can be punitive. You can penalize them. Jesus said treat them like the Pagans or the tax collectors. He knows we tried A, B and C. The thought of this sounds so liberating and so appealing to those of us that want to detach until we think again about who said it. Jesus.

How did the one who said this treat the tax collector? Hm. Maybe it's more challenging than I thought. How did the one who said this, the one who said this, by the way, is the one who said there is no limitation on forgiveness. The one who said this about treat them like a tax collector is caught at Matthew's house having invited all of the tax collectors and sinners over for dinner, personally. What's more intimate than sitting down and having food and talking? This is the same one that called out by the Pharisees and the Scribes for hanging out with the tax collectors and the sinners because he might somehow be endorsing their behavior. This passage isn't nearly as easy as I thought it was upon first reading.

Jesus says try your list. Go through it and when you get to the end of the list and you're utterly exhausted and you're utterly at wits end and you think this is a losing battle and I will never engage in that relationship again. It's better that they are out of my life. Jesus says I get it. Treat them like I treated the Pagans and the tax collectors. This is great.

One day Jesus was teaching a parable and he talked about a father who had two sons and the father told the sons to go to work. The one son said I'm not going to go to work, but he did show up. He tells the other son go to work and he says okay, I'll go to work, but then he failed to show up. Jesus says, okay, which one of those guys do you think goes to Heaven? They all said, oh, the guy who said he wasn't go to

go, but he showed up. He did it anyway. Jesus says, yeah, truly I tell you the tax collector and the prostitutes they're going to enter the Kingdom of Heaven before you. Oh, this is one of those passages that I just don't want to hear when I think about members of my family that I don't want to deal with. This is the kind of behavior that makes the teachings of Jesus so confounding. Try everything. Exhaust your list and when you get to the end of the list start treating them the way I treated tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners.

Why in the world would Jesus ask us to do this? Why would Jesus ask us to treat the people in our family who have done us wrong the way that He treated tax collectors and sinners? There's really only one answer. It's what Jesus did for you. It's what Jesus did for me. That's what Jesus does through the Holy Spirit for each and every one of us. It's called Grace. Jesus asks us simply to do what He has done for us. Paul explained it this way to his church in Corinth, 2 Corinthians, 18. You may want to write this down. All this is from God, who reconciled, that's an important word, who reconciled us to Him. God says they're irreconcilable. We love that term, irreconcilable differences. All this is from God who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

He goes on that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ. Listen, not counting the peoples sins against them. Oh. That's what Jesus does for me. That's what Jesus did for you. God looked down upon humanity and was so disgusted with it, but yet that ember is still burning, isn't it? It's family. It never goes away, but He looks at us and He says, you know they're not compatible with me. They're not compatible with my values. They are not compatible with what I am all about, yet He wanted so badly to have a relationship with the very people who were incompatible and He had gone through the list; the 10 commandments, Leviticus, here's the list. It never worked. When he was at the end of his list, He said I'm going to make them compatible, even if they do nothing to change. I'm going to do it on my end.

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Speaker 1: ... do nothing to change. I'm going to do it on my end. That's called reconciliation. He sent his only begotten son to die on a cross to be resurrected for the sake of my soul, for the sake of your soul, for the sake of eternal life, for the sake of salvation. That is the message of the crucifixion. Leading into Easter, that is the message of Easter. That God gave us what we could never earn, never deserve, to be reconciled not because of what we've done but because he just said, this fight, though often losing, is worth having. I want a relationship with my family so bad I'll do what I can do on my end.

You ever go to a hotel and you get one of those little electronic keys? They don't have keys anymore, they have the little card, it looks like a credit card, and you take it to your room and you put it in and a green light, your door opens up, but usually

on or about the second or third day and you're tired and you're exhausted and with the kids and you come up with the cooler and everything else and you go through and you hit it and it's a red light. And you think, oh, it doesn't work. You know what that means? It's not compatible. Your card's no longer compatible with that little machine.

So what do you do? You don't fix the machine. You go down to the desk and they do something to the card and then you bring it back and it works. Now it's compatible and the machine hasn't changed a bit, has it?

That's what Paul was talking about. That's what Jesus did for us. I can't change the people, I'd like to change the people, but I do it on my end. Because maybe there's something more at stake here than just the relationship. Maybe there's your peace of mind in play. That's what reconciliation is all about. So Jesus has the audacity to say, do your list and when you're done, keep extending grace. Because what God didn't do is sit down and say, okay, here's the deal. For us to be reconciled, we're going to go to counseling and I'm going to sit you down ... this is God and you, right ... and you're an idiot, and you did this, and you lied, and I know your thoughts and you're a sinner and you sin, and you sin, I know what you did last night ... and here's the deal. When you get all that cleaned up, all that right and you've made a promise to me, and not only made the promise but lived in the promise and demonstrated to me over a long period of time that you are no longer doing that, then we can talk.

He didn't do that. He said, I'm in the relationship whether you change or not. And we're reconciled to God through Christ because of nothing that we've done. In other words, God figured out a way to be reconciled to us and not let our sin get in the way. That's called Christianity. It's very, very difficult. This thing called Christianity is not for the faint at heart. It is not easy. And what we want to do is say, you know what? You can be reconciled to God but you can't be reconciled to me. Not until you get it right. What we're really saying is, my standards are higher than God's before I will give you grace. So we struggle, and we want to detach.

Then I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, Paul, Paul, whoa, if I participate with them in all their toxins won't I be endorsing their behavior? I mean, if my mom shows up with that cretin that she married that we all hate, won't I be telling all my siblings that I'm okay with her marrying that guy? I can't surrender. I can't endorse that behavior. If we go to our uncle's house, who doesn't live like we live, won't I be endorsing that lifestyle? I don't know if I could do that. We should probably just detach.

I get asked this all the time. Paul, if I do that, won't I be endorsing the behavior? You know what I say? It might look like that, but then you'll look a whole lot like Jesus. This is hard stuff. Jesus says, try your list and when you're at wit's end, treat them like I treat tax collectors.

You may have to invite them to your house for dinner, but this is all I know about

Christ; he was never worried one second about guilt by association. In fact, it got him crucified. He didn't care. He said I'll do whatever in my power to keep the fire burning. They may not live like I want them to live. They [inaudible 00:24:52] honor the truth that I'm trying to teach them but you know what, they're my family and I'm going to keep the ember burning, as faint as it is, and to do that I cannot [inaudible 00:25:04], I've got to connect. I got to keep the light. I got to do what I've got to do. They may never change but I've got to do what I've got to do. And hardly a page in the Gospels goes by where Jesus isn't somehow interfacing with sinners and his reputation in ministry is on the line. But he does it anyway. And he risked his reputation and he risked being misunderstood in order simply to keep the old fire burning.

Here's what I know. We better be glad he did because we're the recipients of that grace. And I praise him every day for moving in my direction when I have done nothing to deserve it. Does this require a lot of humility? You bet it does. To go back and talk to that relative that did you so wrong and created very real pain in your life and it hurt ... say, Paul, I have so much humility to do that.

Jesus said, I'll humble myself to the point of the cross so whatever you got going on, it's not as bad as the cross. Humility though is not easy. I understand that. But it's a whole lot better than regret. And that really is your choice. You choose humility, you treat people the way Christ asked you to treat them, or you end up with a boat load of regret. You know how many families I've seen in my office and they get to the end of their days and they have detached because they were right and they didn't muster the humility to go back into the ring and now they wish they had one more day to try to get it right.

I'm telling you, humility costs you but not nearly as much as regret. So Jesus gives us this crazy instruction, a very practical list that in many respects and many times actually helps but sometimes it doesn't. Even then, Jesus charges us, people of faith, to treat the people that have hurt us the most like tax collectors and sinners.

So maybe there's more at stake here than just the relationship. Maybe there's your peace of mind. This is hard stuff. Maybe the reason we're called to do this is because God did it for us. Here's all I know. I'm no hero in this story, let me assure you, but just when I thought I had detached for the last time with my father, I thought, I'm going back in the ring one more time. And it wasn't just one more time, it was dozens of times because the truth is he never got sober. In fact, he died of addiction-induced heart disease. But I don't have one second of regret and I cherish now not the bad parts about my father's life but I cherish the good parts and I think so favorably of my father now when people say, Paul, you remind us of your daddy, I don't cringe, I say, praise be to God that I would be blessed for one morsel of his giftedness. And I have siblings for whom that's not the case.

Humility, or regret; this is hard to do, but it is the call of the faithful. Now if you're sitting here today and you're puzzled because you think your circumstances is real bad, I want to be real clear about one thing. We're going to come back next week

and we're going to talk about this thing called boundaries, and I need you to be real clear about this and if you don't remember anything else I said today, remember this, if you're in an abusive situation, I'm not asking you to go back in the ring physically. God would not want that. We place a premium here on our ministry to those who are abused physically, psychologically, mentally, particularly women.

Many churches betray the passages sometimes and tell you, no, you got to get back in the ring physically. No, no, no. That's not what this passage is about. This passage simply is a reminder that your desire to have a relationship with family never goes away. And maybe there are some losing battles that worth fighting for, but we're going to come back next week and I'm going to give you some real practical tools about how to establish some boundaries when we do this so that your peace of mind and well being is preserved at the same time.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, this is so incredibly hard. We love the part about Christianity where you died for us and we're forgiven and away we go and life works out but, Lord, it doesn't do that very often. And, Lord, I know everybody in here's got somebody they love that it's just not working out with and there's part of them that wants to detach. Would you help us, Lord, to figure out how appropriately to deal with them the way you dealt with tax collectors and pagans?

In your son's name, we pray. Amen.