Lift Up the Family

The Dysfunctional Family

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"If any person be in Christ, he is a new creature..."
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

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The Dysfunctional Family

In Lessons l and 2 we looked at what makes up a family and what makes a family healthy. In this lesson we will look at the dysfunctional, unhealthy family.

Before continuing, please write three or four sentences describing what you think a dysfunctional family is like. **Write your thoughts on the enclosed Response Sheet and then put it out of your sight until the end of this lesson.** Then, we recommend that you read the entire lesson through once without looking up any of the scriptures. Finally, go back for a more in-depth study before completing the Response Sheet.

I. Introduction

When God created the family, he meant it to be a loving, nurturing, caring, secure place for man. It was to be man's refuge against the stresses and injuries of society. It was to be where children entered the world, grew and developed into healthy, mature adults. As a result of Adam's and Eve's sin, the family relationship was damaged with the rest of creation. The evils that descended upon mankind and the world following The Fall affected even Adam's and Eve's family (Genesis 3:14–24). Adam and Eve, who had lived in complete union with God, saw what should have been a healthy, perfect family disintegrate into a dysfunctional state. Cain, their oldest son, was the first to display jealousy and envy. This eventually led him to kill his younger brother, Abel.

Since then, the family has been under constant stress, pulling it away from what God intended it to be. As we read the Bible, we see the families of some of the greatest men disintegrate into dysfunction. The example of Abraham's family shows that dysfunction is carried from generation to generation. Abraham, the friend of God, allowed jealousy and envy to enter his family when his promised son, Isaac, was born. Sarah demanded that Ishmael, Abraham's son by his servant, be driven out of the family. In Isaac's generation his sons, Esau and Jacob, were jealous and envious of each other. Jacob stole Esau's birthright, and Esau tried to kill Jacob. In the fourth generation, eleven of Jacob's sons were jealous of Joseph. They started to kill him, but greed made them sell him into slavery. Sarah, a Godly woman, gave in to envy and jealousy trying to protect her son, Isaac. The example she set plagued her family for generations. Was this chosen family dysfunctional? YES, in some areas. Does this mean that they were cut off from God's love and blessings. NO! Although they had problems, they still sought to do God's will.

This tells us much about God, His will and His love. God wants the best for us, but He understands that we live in a fallen world. He is sad when we fail, but His grace covers those who try to do His will.

II. Definition of a Dysfunctional Family

The dysfunctional family is one in which the needs of the individual members are not met. Often their needs are not recognized by other members of the family. It is an attitude of "every man for himself, and the Devil take the hindmost."

We often think of a dysfunctional family as one in which alcoholism, drug abuse, sexual abuse, and physical abuse are a daily part of the family's life. This is often true but not always.

Charles Figley said, "Healthy families had just as many problems as did unhealthy ones, but they (healthy ones) tended to see the problems as 'ours' rather than 'yours' or 'mine.' They took care not to put the other members on the defensive and not to make them part of the problem but part of the solution. Typically, one spouse enlisted the help of the other in coming up with a way to cope." All families have troubles. The way they are handled is the difference between a healthy and a dysfunctional family.

III. Types Of Dysfunctional Families

Dysfunctional families are not all alike. There are few families that are totally dysfunctional. Most families are dysfunctional in some areas while they function normally in others. On the other hand, in a few, the entire family system is dysfunctional.

A. <u>One Or Both Parents Are Involved In Substance Addiction or Abuse</u>

This does not mean only illegal drug abuse. It includes alcohol, prescription medications, and over-the-counter drugs.

Substance abuse is widespread in modern America. The effect of this on the family has been extremely destructive. Although a family might not end in divorce, the long-term damage done to the family members is devastating. The damage includes loss of trust, loss of self-esteem, lack of ability to create and maintain intimate relationships, and need to control others.

B. <u>One or More Members Suffers from Significant Emotional Illness</u>

When a family member has an emotional illness such as chronic depression or schizophrenia, there is a chance that the rest of the family will surrender their needs and wants to the demands of the ill person. When all of a family's energies are

focused on the needs and wants of one member, the rest of the family suffers. Their needs and wants go unmet.
In a family with chronic illness, the needs of the sick member should be met. The rest of the family, however, should understand that their needs and wants are still legitimate and need to be met.

C. Families With Harsh or Dogmatic Rules

These families suppress development of independence and maturity within individual members of the family. Members are expected to conform to a mold without independent thought or action. These harsh, dogmatic rules are usually the result of one parent's need to control everything in his/her life and the lives of the rest of the family. It is unfortunate, but often the parent will try to justify this harsh, dogmatic control through religion. He or she believes that only by creating and enforcing rigid rules with harsh penalties can control be kept.

Usually, the rest of the family accepts a "peace at any price" attitude to survive. Those who surrender to the controller lose their independence and boundaries. Other members will rebel and escape at the first opportunity.

D. The Sexually or Physically Abusive Family

Sexual and physical abuse is another way to control other members of the family. Abuse is not just what a parent does to a child. It can be spouses against each other or children against each other. Also, spouse abuse is not just a husband abusing his wife; it can be a wife abusing her husband.

The abusive family not only destroys itself, but it also sets a pattern of dysfunction that can continue for generations.

The American Humane Association says:

- Twenty-five percent of the girls and ten percent of the boys under the age of eighteen will be sexually abused.
- The average age of the abused child is seven.
- Seventy percent of the runaways are fleeing an abusive home environment.
- Eighty percent of the prisoners in jail were abused as children.
- Ninety-seven percent of the hardcore delinquents were abused as children.
- Eighty percent of the prostitutes were sexually abused as children.

E. The "Emotional Incest" Family

Emotional incest is not sexual abuse. It is an unhealthy emotional or psychological relationship between a parent and child. Types of emotional incest are:

l. *Parents are over parenting.*

In this family the parent is too controlling. He controls everything the child does and thinks. The parent smothers the child. The child loses his emotional independence. The parent's desire for control is not just to control the child; he or she has the idea that happiness can only be found when he controls everything in the environment. The parent controls the child by shouting, giving unsolicited advice, nagging, and other manipulative methods. If the child refuses to act in the way the parent wants, he is punished. This is not necessarily a spanking or withholding of privileges. It includes the parents' ignoring the child, pouting, withdrawing and other psychological methods.

2. *The inattentive parent is detached.*

The parent is detached from the child. He or she is so attached to his or her own activities that he or she fails to provide the child with emotional attention. To gain attention, the child will go to extremes. If positive methods do not gain the parent's attention, the child will use negative methods.

3. *The child "parents" the parent.*

This occurs when a parent due to drug/alcohol abuse, physical or mental illness, or loss of a spouse is incapable of functioning normally. The child becomes his parent's caretaker, thereby losing his normal childhood experiences. This does not mean that a child should not accept responsibilities for helping around the home. These responsibilities should be suitable for the age and maturity of the child. Chores help to teach a child responsibility and independence.

4. *The child is put in the position of a missing parent.*

The child functions in the role of the missing or nonfunctioning parent. He or she fulfills the missing parent's responsibility. The child may even be pressured to fill the emotional needs of the remaining family.

V. Roles In A Dysfunctional Family

The members of a dysfunctional family develop different coping roles within the family. The following table describes these roles.

Table 6–1. Roles In a Dysfunctional Family

The Role	Motivating Feeling	Identifying Symptoms	"Payoff" for Individual	"Payoff" for Family	Possible Price
Enabler	anger	powerlessness	importance, self-righteousness	responsibility	illness, martyrdom
Hero	inadequacy, guilt	over achievement	attention (positive)	self-worth	compulsive drive, workaholism as teens and adults
Scapegoat	hurt	delinquency	attention (negative)	focus away from dependent	self-destruction, use of anger and intimidation to handle problems
Lost Child	loneliness	solitariness, shyness	escape	relief	social isolation, a "doormat" adult
Mascot	fear	clowning, hyperactivity	attention (amused)	fun	immaturity, emotional illness, master of deception

V. Issues of a Dysfunctional Family

Both the healthy and dysfunctional family have the same issues. The difference between a healthy and a dysfunctional family is how they deal with these critical issues. To be dysfunctional, a family does not have to be dysfunctional in all areas; it can be normal in all areas but one or two. Does this make the family dysfunctional? Yes, in those areas in which it does not function normally, a family is considered dysfunctional.

This might not sound too bad, but it can be. A family that is dysfunctional in a couple of areas will change for better or worse; it is not fixed in time. If it does not correct those

dysfunctional areas, they will grow and contaminate other functional areas. The more areas that are contaminated, the more dysfunctional a family will become.

When a family has only a few dysfunctional areas, it is in an extremely dangerous position. Immediate, positive action is needed to correct and heal it. If not, it will self-destruct.

According to Amy Dean some of these issues are:

A. Authority

Authority in a dysfunctional family is inflexible and autocratic. All choices are made by one member of the family, usually a parent, without any input from the rest of the family. The choice is usually for the good of the authoritarian and does not consider any other member of the family.

B. Time Spent Together

The members of a dysfunctional family have little or no time for each other. Usually, they go out of their way to avoid one another. When the parents promise the children that they will spend time with them, they break their promise.

C. Responsibilities

Often the responsibilities will fall on one or two members of the family. The rest of the family will have few, if any responsibilities. Frequently, the responsibilities forced on a child will be more important than his or her age and maturity should allow; such as a twelve year old boy trying to fill the role of the father or a twelve year old girl trying to be the mother.

D. Feeling

In a dysfunctional family, having or displaying emotions is discouraged or forbidden. When a person expresses an emotion, he is punished or ignored. Anger is usually one of the few emotions that is accepted. Anger within a dysfunctional family is not resolved. Family members stay angry at each other, allowing the anger to grow and poison the family system.

E. Honesty

Secrets, lying, and deception are the accepted way of life in a dysfunctional family. Usually, it is the result of a need to survive or need for privacy. There is no open and honest communication.

F. Communication

Communication is kept to a minimum. It is used to relay commands. Family issues are rarely discussed, especially sensitive ones. Issues are dealt with by lying, denial, and keeping secrets.

VI. Conclusion

God created us to be complete, mature, perfect. When we fail to measure up to God's standards, our relationships suffer. Our most important relationship, the family, bears the brunt of unhealthy, sinful personalities. The main problem with a dysfunctional family is that its members fail to love each other unconditionally. Because we fail to love each other, we turn inward and become selfish. It is only when we turn our lives over to God that we can love each other. In love, we become what God wants us to be. We become healthy, mature, complete, perfect.

Now, please return to the enclosed Response Sheet and write your answers to the study questions about this lesson.