



CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"A FATHER AND HIS SONS"

Sunday Morning, June 17, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: Genesis 37

Up until four years ago, I found it very easy to preach a Father's Day sermon. I had some definite ideas on the subject, and felt no reluctance in setting them forth in a vigorous way. But then something happened that changed my whole outlook - I became a father myself. Suddenly the issues became completely reversed. Whereas once I had theories and no children, now I had children and no theories. I stopped trying to tell other fathers what they should do, and began to search with them for what we should do. Becoming a father changed me from an authority to a learner in this area. And this morning it is in this spirit that I approach the task. I sit where you sit and speak to myself as much as to you. I want to be taught, as you do, about the crucial relationship between father and child, and that will be our objective today. As a means to that end, I would like for us to study one of the most famous families in the Bible. There is helpful truth here, not only for fathers, but for all who are involved in the human situation.

The family I have in mind are the original children of Israel. The twelve sons of the patriarch gave rise to the covenant nation of the Old Testament. It is with them and their descendants that much of the Bible is concerned. And from the relationships of that first home, we can learn much that we ought to know on this Father's day of 1962. Let me point out three things that are of particular note here.

First, let us notice the significance of the father's action. Israel was a powerful figure, and in that intimate father-son relationship, what he did carried a tremendous impact. In this area, as in the physical realm, there is "a law of motion." Actions produce consequences; one movement precipitates others; there is a chain-reaction going on and on as the result of one man's deeds. And as you observe the story of Israel and his sons, it is not hard to trace this pattern. One action of great consequence was the father's favoritism of his son Joseph (Genesis 37:3). This went far back into Israel's life, for Joseph was Rachel's first-born, and Rachel was his most beloved wife. However, no matter how it is explained, the attitude had fatal implications. It was not good for the boy himself, as Joseph became quite a little "show-off" (Genesis 37:5-11). Neither was it good for the other boys, for they were naturally made insecure and jealous and came to hate their father's pet (Genesis 37:4). From one point of view, it is hard to understand why Israel let this sort of thing happen, for he had come out of a home where this very thing had been a problem. His father Isaac had favored Esau, and Israel knew what it was like to be "loved less." The fact that he would make the same mistake confirms what H. G. Wells once said quite cynically: "The only thing we learn from history is that we do not learn from history." At any rate, the family ties were disrupted, and instead of developing a sense of oneness, Israel's partiality produced competitive hostility and the deepest animosity. This all erupted one day

when the brothers caught Joseph out by himself. They seized him and almost killed him, but finally settled the issue by selling him to some Ishmaelite traders on their way to Egypt (Genesis 37:18-28). For that day and time this was an unheard-of act, for society was organized into clans and they were expected to stick together. When brothers would sell their own flesh and blood to foreigners, it reveals the deep intensity of their hatred.

And who was most responsible for this terrible action? The charge must be laid at the feet of the father. He had done what Paul later warned against: he "provoked his children to anger" (Ephesians 6:4) by his indefensible favoritism. As such he stands as a sober warning to every father to be mindful of his actions. We do cast shadows, whether we realize it or not. What we do or do not do influences our children more than we may ever think. No father "liveth or acteth unto himself"; by virtue of this intimate contact, the ripples emanating from us may have a life-or-death effect on those closest to us. If I cheat on my income tax or drive recklessly or hold strong prejudices, I need not be surprised to see the same things echoed back from my children. What I sow in them will inevitably affect the harvest of their lives.

Just recently I heard Dr. Roy McClain tell of a prominent man in his city who had one daughter, his pride and joy. The girl had been given every advantage and had a brilliant future ahead, but on the night she graduated from high school she was killed in a car wreck. Investigation revealed that all those involved had been drinking, and the father reacted in a holy rage. He vowed to find out who had illegally sold the liquor to those minors, and got cooperation from all the city fathers in this search. Three weeks went by and nothing was found. The tension began to subside a bit, and one evening the father went to the bar in his basement and unlocked the door to his private liquor chest. There on the shelf was a note which he read unbelievably: "Dear Daddy: I hope you don't mind what I've done. After all, you only graduate from high school once, so I took one of your favorite bottles to help us celebrate. Please don't be mad. Love, Judy." His indignant search was ended; he was his own answer. For you see, what fathers do is quite significant. We influence our little ones - for good or for bad - more than we like to realize. A terrible thing happened in Israel's family, and to a great degree the father was responsible.

The second point I want to emphasize is the significance of inherited traits. If you follow the story of Israel's family beyond the selling of Joseph, you will see another quality coming out. The brothers dared not tell the father what they had done. So they conceived a grand deception. They took his famous coat and dipped it in blood and brought it to their father saying they had found it in the field (Genesis 37:31-35). He identified it, naturally assuming the boy had been killed, and went into deep mourning.

There is real irony in this scene of Israel's being deceived by his sons. For you see, years before, he had done a very similar thing to his father Isaac. He took his brother's clothes and misrepresented them so he could gain an advantage (Genesis 27:5-29). In fact, this sort of thing characterized all Israel's early life. He had tricked and cheated everyone with whom he had come in contact. It had become his way of living. And now it is almost frightening to see played out the law of the harvest. Here Israel is getting back just exactly what he had given. He is reaping the same crop he sowed. He is receiving in wages precisely what he had put on deposit years before.

Life is like that, for God is a consistent Being. There is forgiveness and mercy and hope, but there is also the moral structure of cause and effect. One cannot walk away from the consequences of his deeds anymore than he can rewrite history. What we do affects what we become and what is done to us.

There is a story about two men who worked together for many years in the construction business. One man had the capital; the other did the actual building. As time moved on, the investor decided to retire. He called in his associate and advised him of this. He said: "As our last project, I want us to build the finest home we have ever constructed. We'll get a choice lot, use the best materials, and spare no expense in making it perfect." The builder knew that his colleague trusted him explicitly. So he did something he had never done before - he began to cheat on his partner. He used shoddy materials and cut corners wherever he could. Finally the house was finished and the builder went as always to give the investor the key. This time it was different. The investor smiled: "I have a surprise for you. Because you have been an honest partner all these years, I want to say thank you. Here is the key. The best house of all is yours." As always, in the act of cheating, he had cheated himself most.

And although he was not conscious of it at the time, this was happening to Israel. He was experiencing the very thing that he had done to others, and what was the connecting link? At least in part, it was the weakness his sons had inherited from him. Now I am fully aware that there is great mystery in the realm of genetics. We cannot speak too absolutely about the effects of heredity on a particular individual. Yet one would be blind to the obvious facts of experience if he did not recognize that something very real is handed on from one generation to another. I am the product of all who have gone before me. Their strengths and weaknesses, their aptitudes and capacities, the temptations which they overcame or by which they were overcome - all this vitally affects what I am. A newborn child is not just a blank sheet of paper on which you are free to write what you wish. He comes with a very definite "given," a nature already clearly defined, and this plays a significant part in what he becomes.

I well remember the thoughts that crowded into my mind when I got my first glimpse of our own children. There was elation and excitement, to be sure; there was also a sense of sobering responsibility, for God had laid a heavy task upon me. And it set off a real experience of self-examination. I began to ask: "What have I given to them in terms of constitution?" It was right then that all my life became very important, for now, hardened into one personality, was the grand total of what I was and what I had done. There was nothing I could do about it then, except pray that I would be a better disciple in the days ahead. But let me say to you who possibly have parenthood ahead, take all of life seriously. Everything you do becomes part of you, and this is what you hand on to posterity. Israel's habit of deception reappeared in sons who deceived him. Like it or not, there is significance to inherited traits.

From all I have said up to this point, it may sound like the father is the only responsible person in the human equation. But this is not accurate, for from the story of the same family comes the third point: the significance of personal decision. If you will look closely, none of the sons turned out quite the same. We know very little about some of them, but when you compare what is known about Reuben and Judah and Joseph, it is very obvious that there is more to life than just environment and heredity. While I have emphasized the effect of fatherhood this

morning, I would not want to overstate the case and construct "a parental determinism." There is always the mystery of individuality, the elusive quality of freedom, the unpredictable response of the person himself. This must never be forgotten, for it plays a crucial part in any life.

The later experiences of Joseph stand as eloquent confirmation of this fact. He was affected by the actions of others, but he rose above it to achieve great success in Egypt. He experienced the pull of an inherited nature, but he had the power to make of it what he would. He was recognized for his purity and trustworthiness, traits that were hardly family virtues. Yet he met all these pressures as a self-determining personality, and illustrates the significance of individual choice. Strong as these other factors may be, the truth remains that we are free to alter our environment and to appropriate what we will from our heredity. The fact that the sons came out of the same context and yet developed quite differently testifies to individuality.

I have emphasized three points in this story of a father and his sons. While each one possesses a measure of truth in itself, the whole truth lies in their unity. Human existence is a three-fold equation; take what a man is, add to it what happens to him, and couple this with his response to these two, and it equals one human life. No one quotient is absolute; neither can any one quotient be left out. They go together to give a description of life.

If this be true, then there is a word to us fathers in the first two parts. As we have seen in Israel, we are deeply involved in both the factors of environment and heredity. What we do and what we are become crucial issues as far as they are concerned. But there is also here a word for all; as seen in Joseph, personal response is of decisive importance.

Therefore, remember: what life does to you is important; but just as important is what you do to life.

"Depart now in the fellowship of God the Father, and as you go, remember: in the goodness of God you were born into this world; by the grace of God you have been kept all the day long, even unto this hour, and by the love of God, fully revealed in the face of Jesus, you are being redeemed. Amen."