

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Families Are Tough: Identified Patient”

Dr. Jay Howell

Genesis 37:17b-36

January 11, 2026

We continue today in our series “Families Are Tough,” looking at the all-too-familiar topics of household dysfunction, something that, newsflash everyone, we’ve all got some dose of, whether it’s within immediate family, extended family, surrogate family, you name it.

But what might the gospel of grace say into such powerful yet just about universal burdens that we share in some form or fashion? Only that it’s tough? I hope it might say more than that. So as we saw last week, we’re exploring these themes through the lens of one particular family’s history, the family of Jacob and his son Joseph in the Book of Genesis.

Last week we saw the blatant favoritism Jacob showed his son Joseph, the second youngest out of twelve sons, crystallized in the gift of an ornate coat, or a coat of many colors. And now we see the resentment, the jealousy, the entitlement, the misdirected unprocessed grief, all of it erupt in a horrible way. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage, Genesis 37:17b-36.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, we pray for your patience today. Truly this Word is disturbing in the cruelty shown between siblings, and in reading it we recognize our own capacity for cruelty and resentment toward those we love or are reminded of others’ past cruelty towards us. Be with us, we pray, and by your Spirit, open up this Word in a new way to us. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

One of our children, I won’t say who, determined that it’d be a good idea to see if a Hot Wheel could make it through a toilet. So without warning, down it goes, but the toy car didn’t completely clear the mechanism, shall we say. So then the same child thought it’d be a good idea to use the toilet, along with, uh, copious amounts of toilet paper, and then flush it. Then it didn’t really flush, at which point the child then thought, hey maybe I should try that again. That’s when we discovered the situation. I’ll fess up that my reaction was not my finest moment of parenting, but after the shock subsided, I went and got the toilet auger. Why do we have one? Because this has happened before. Did the thing, dislodged the Hot Wheel, and it all went down.

But in thinking about that particular incident, I wonder now what I would’ve done—and how many plumbers would’ve thanked me—if in trying to fix and clear the clog myself, hoping it would all just flush away, a leak sprang somewhere else, or maybe just created a worse clog further down the line.

Aren’t you glad you came to church today? The reason for the amateur plumbing story is because of, in one conception at least, how families work sometimes, namely that it’s rarely just one simple thing; it’s an interconnected system of relationships, whether they be close or healthy, or whether they be strained, “clogged,” or “leaky.” And doing one thing in one place might look it resolves something, but it can sometimes cause other things to come up somewhere else.

To a severe, violent, and troubling degree, that's what's going on here with Joseph and his family. We come back to Joseph's story not long after what we looked at last week. Jacob sends Joseph out to check on his brothers as their tending to their father's flock. So he finds his brothers. But they conspire to kill him and then to cover it up.

Reuben, the oldest brother, tried to deflect it, suggesting that instead of killing him directly, they should just leave him in a nearby pit or dry well, himself scheming to return to get him out. They agree, so when Joseph gets there, they seize him and throw him in the pit. They notice a trade caravan going by. It's suggested to make some profit and sell Joseph to them instead. The brothers agree, and so they do just that. Then to cover it all up, they take Joseph's expensive coat, dip it in goat's blood, take it back their father so that he would be convinced of Joseph's death by a wild animal.

And the passage ends with the note, "Thus his father bewailed him. Meanwhile the Midianites had sold [Joseph] in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard."

Whew. Disturbing stuff. Just layer upon layer of deception and schemes, one built upon another to prevent the truth from coming out, that these brothers had betrayed their brother into bondage and then staged his death to their father to cover it up. And all of it, I would offer, was because no one was willing to have the tough conversation, and so because of the avoidance, because the real problem wasn't dealt with, it erupts in this horrible way.

It was everyone involved, it seems. Whether it was Jacob avoiding his grief over his wife's death and projecting it onto his children, or whether it was his brothers avoiding the pain they felt from their father and instead taking it out on Joseph, or whether it was Reuben avoiding telling his brothers that what they were doing was wrong and instead deflecting to a half measure, or whether it was Joseph himself, who though not deserving of being thrown in a pit and sold into slavery was not exactly innocent either, no one was willing to have the tough, loving conversation with someone in their family. Not that that would've been easy. Those tough, loving talks are hard. Not exactly a knock of this family. We all do it too, don't we? Avoiding the tough topics, the awkward tensions. This is what families are made of, right? Or maybe it's just me.

I have this uncle, or had this uncle, I don't even know. I don't know if he's still with us. But he himself had had some troubles in his life, but none of that justified what he was doing, because for years, even well into adulthood, he would manipulate my grandmother, who has since passed, into giving him money, guiltning her for what he would call mistakes that she made as a mother to him that therefore indebted her to him as an adult.

And she would do it. And others knew about it. And one person might talk to another person about it, "Oh can you believe what Tommy is doing?" but it wouldn't be raised in a direct way. And this went on for years. Until as often happens, it reached a boiling point, when the pot boils over, or, mixing my metaphors here, when a leak springs or a worse clog gets lodged in the plumbing.

And this isn't to knock my own family. I'd dare say everyone here can imagine some situation in your own immediate, extended, or surrogate family, some kind of unhealthy, toxic dynamic that everyone just kind of tolerates. Why? Well because confronting it is scary. And well, because to some degree we're used to it.

There's a branch of psychotherapy known as family systems theory. To our mental health professionals here, this is all likely familiar to you, and I'm probably butchering some detail of it in trying to quickly summarize it. If you're curious in looking more into it, names like Murray Bowen and Edwin Friedman loom large, so this

is also something of a general footnote to them. Main gist is you can't always just treat an individual with individual problems, because they're part of a broader system of relationships, especially within a family.

And a big thing in this so-called family systems theory is examining the whole network of relationships in one's family, recognizing triangles and avoidance, because that is somewhat our natural tendency: to avoid addressing a difficult situation and preferring the status quo, even if the status quo is unhealthy. It's a "devil you know" sort of thing.

And those networks, those family systems, Friedman offers, might be compared to a plumbing system. They can reach an equilibrium of pressure and flow, even if there are problems within it, and it'll keep limping along, that is until something breaks, leaks, or clogs.

And that break, leak, or clog in this family systems theory is sometimes known as an "identified patient." It's the person in the family system who is not necessarily the weakest, but more the part where the most pressure is felt. Common instance of it, especially as triangles are concerned, is when there's turmoil between spouses and they're not dealing with it, the burden is often carried, even without realizing it, by their child.

If you want a clear example of an "identified patient," well, just look at what we read. It's Joseph. Now he was far from innocent, but when it comes down to it, the brothers' root problem wasn't Joseph. It was with their father and how he favored one over the rest of them. Instead of addressing it with their father, they saw fit to conspire to kill Joseph and then put layer upon layer of deflection and deception to cover it up. Joseph wasn't the weakest of the bunch, but he was where the most pressure built up.

Any of this starting to pinch anyone? Now I don't share any of this as the world's leading expert on family systems, nor as the world's shining example of a well-balanced, self-differentiated son, brother, husband, or father. Even as I am talking about this now, I have in mind any number of unhealthy dynamics within family, whether it's immediate, extended, surrogate, or church, dynamics that I recognize, hey, that's not good, but I'm used to it, so I'm not going to upset the apple cart, not going to do the hard work of having the tough, loving conversation that might lead to some kind of healing. And I'm also wondering who have I condemned to being the "identified patient" as a result of my avoidance?

Because no matter what layers we stack on top of it, whether it's simple avoidance, or maybe deflection, or even as severe as the level of deception we see among Joseph's brothers, eventually the pressure builds in the system, and a leak will eventually spring.

Can you imagine any such dynamic in your own life?

It's hard to think about. Even harder to conceive of dealing with it. *That* can be really scary.

But is that all we're left with? Hey, families are tough. We're prone to avoidance, and it leads to injury to those we care about. What might the gospel of grace say to this?

For one, recognizing its seriousness is a big part. How empty would it feel if all of a sudden Joseph's brothers said to their father, "Eh, it doesn't matter. We're cool"? Have peace and healing been reached? No. That's sweeping things under the rug. That's doing a patch job in the plumbing and hoping it lasts a bit longer. Just another means of avoidance, really.

We heard those words from the Apostle in Ephesians: "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every

ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." I mean, we could do a whole other sermon just on that, but hear how those words of grace guide us in how one in Christ might relate to another: "speaking the truth in love," for what purpose? We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. The very means by which we grow in Christ is not in believing the Christian faith to mean everything is fine, it's fine. It's in recognizing that the path of grace is one blazed in truth, truth spoken in love, and such truth such speech such love is how we grow up into the one who has claimed us by grace, Christ himself.

When I was growing up, I was fortunate to have someone in my life willing to have the tough talk with me, to show me grace and speak the truth in love to me. I was in a bad place, but I was really good at hiding it.

Things had deteriorated at home—or at least I perceived them that way—but I was Reuben, I was the oldest child, so I was inclined to maintain that status quo, even if the status quo was unhealthy for me and for everyone. Address things? Address what? Everything's okay. Everything's fine. I'm okay. I'm fine. Why would you think anything's wrong? Just look at me. I'm doing just fine. I'm doing well in school. I'm not getting into trouble. I'm well behaved and well spoken. I'm plugged in more and more in church youth group, for goodness' sake. And I knew all the right answers.

But underneath, a simmering anger that it had fallen to me—or at least that I perceived (wrongly) that it had fallen to me—to hold things together, and then with it a resentment toward anyone I perceived to be shirking their responsibilities, because it would mean that I would be obliged to pick up the slack. And why would I pick up the slack for them? Well, to hold things together, because everything's fine.

But then there was someone who cared for me enough to speak the truth in love to me, and for me at that time—it doesn't always need to sound like this, but for me—the truth spoken in love sounded like, "Yeah, I don't buy your act. I don't buy that everything's okay and that you're okay. Why don't you share what's really going on?"

And for one reason or another, I did. I actually did. And I remember as I spoke with him—he was a pastor of mine—I was wondering, okay I've had this moment of catharsis, what next? And I remember him saying, "I think you're about to have a hard conversation with your father. Then I think you're about to have a hard conversation with your mom and your sister. Then I think you're about to have a hard conversation with some of your friends."

And as I did, an amazing thing started to happen: rather than layer upon layer of deflection and denial, I was met with forgiveness and understanding. Now I know I was fortunate and deeply blessed in that regard, because that does not always happen. But the relief, of something that had been so hidden and yet so gnawing being released and addressed, well, it was a formative season of the power of grace, of truth spoken in love, of life shared in the church and how it spills into life shared in the family and vice versa, something that shapes me to this day.

And I imagine how different it all could've looked if I instead I said, well, let's not address it, but let's throw it in the pit and hope it resolves itself, and how different it all would've looked if that voice in my life hadn't taken the courageous step of asking, "Why don't you tell me how you're really doing?"

How could you be the voice of grace, of truth, spoken in love, today?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.