

Family Ties: Stretched

Ephesians 4:25-32

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Today we finish our Family Ties sermon series. It is hard to believe, but next Sunday is the First Sunday of Lent. Lent is the 40 days of preparation towards Easter. It is a time of repentance, reflection and renewal. This Wednesday, March 1st is Ash Wednesday. **(image)** You will have an opportunity to have the sign of the cross placed on your forehead as a sign of remembering that our own mortality and our sinfulness. Many think that that is just a “Catholic” thing. However many denominations do this including United Methodists.

As you will notice we have several opportunities as you begin this spiritual journey. With people’s busyness traveling to work, or perhaps difficulty in parking and getting out of the car this year we will have an Ashes to Go in Belcher Parking lot from 6:30-7:30 am. You do not need to get out of your car. I will be there to simply have you drive in the parking lot...and a personal blessing and imposition of ashes on your forehead. From 7:30-9:00 a.m. a time of personal prayer and reflection is available for you in the chapel with the receiving of the ashes. Wednesday night we have a full worship service at 7:00 p.m. child care provided with the opportunity to receive the ashes. I will begin our Lenten sermon series that night. This season the sermons will carry the theme: “I Give Up.” I hope you will join for at least one of the several opportunities this Wednesday.

But today we finish the Family Ties series. A bit of a recap. We began with Family Ties: Outward. It was the realization that out here...is our family. We are members of the household of faith...the PHUMC family. The next week we focused on Family Ties: Upward. We are connected because God is our Father and we can be strengthened with His power and be filled with the fullness of God. Last week...Family Ties: Knotted. We had the reality that we are flawed and often have flawed families. We asked for God’s grace to give us humility, gentleness, patience, and love to strive to maintain unity in the family. Today---Family Ties: Stretched.

If I were to have a huge rubber band and hold it up it is loose, no tension. But when we 2 people pull it---it is stretched and there is tension. **(image)** Now a couple of things could happen when a rubber band is stretched. I can just let go and SNAP the other person gets stung. Or...vicey vercey. Or we can be stretched and keep that relationship in constant tension. But notice what happens when of 2 things happened. I’m going to release, gently and notice the stretched tension is gone. Or I can move towards the person holding the other end of the stretched rubber band and tension, and I move towards them the tension is gone. Now maybe not the most profound analogies, but I hope you get the point that when Family Ties are stretched there is tension. So what do we do? How do we ease the tension? Do we just drop it? Do we let our emotions snap and hurt the other person? Or is there a way to come together to ease the tension?

In some ways this is like Family Ties: Knotted, and yet with some different scripture we will see some things that might be helpful in these Stretched relationships. Especially with how to communicate and reach out in those stretched relationships.

Verse 2: ...let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

Now is Paul, the writer of the Ephesians said this about neighbors how much more so with Family. Family...connected...members of one another. In the next chapter, Ephesians 4:15, Paul says “speak the truth in love.” Now perhaps you have been the recipient of one speaking the truth in love. And I don’t know about you, but sometimes it sure sounds like harsh criticism and belittling rather than true love. Therefore it is important that you know the type of relationship and how to handle that communication. There are important communication ways that we need to be aware of when relationships are stretched. We will talk about those in just a moment.

The next couple of verses are one I often use in premarital counseling: **Verse 26: ²⁶Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and give no opportunity to the devil.**

Now did you notice that it does not say, “If you are angry?” But very interestingly, “Be angry.” It’s kind of like it is expected or the realization that you should be angry when you are treated unfairly. So in essence there is a permission given here that it is okay to be angry. Yep, Christians get angry. Anybody here been in some type of family relationship and have been angry?

Now I am what I call a “stuffer.” I often stuff my emotions inside. I am not a yeller or a screamer. When I get angry I often retreat within myself. It is something that I have had to work on in our marriage. Sarah can read my like a book. And I’ve gotten better, but she use to know I was bothered, or even angry about something and she would say... “Is everything okay?” And I would respond “YES!” (And smoke would be billowing from my ears!) She would say, “Anything wrong.” And I would say, “NO.” But we will see that non verbal communication is part of the communication we need to be aware of when relationships are stretched.

When I taught 9th grade Speech class and when I was in seminary I was Instructor for Speech 101 for one semester at Asbury College I would write on the board, **“A person cannot not communicate.”** The double negative is intentional. A person always communicates....even if they are not saying anything. In my years of pastoring I’ve attended my share of committee meetings....Lord help me. And I pay attention to some degree more to the non-verbal communication as much as the verbal. I seen eyes roll, I’ve seen arms crossed, I’ve seen people not paying attention....all of that communicates their opinion and engagement in the committee relationship.

So to speak the truth to those in your family you need to make sure the timing and the way and where it is said is appropriate. If I have a chunk of broccoli stuck in my front teeth. I would want to know the truth. However, I would not want you to yell across the room. “HEY Dave, it looks like you got a tree growing out of your mouth. It’s broccoli.”

Would better be if you kind of came up to me and said quietly said, “Dave, you might want to know that I think you have broccoli stuck in your teeth.” Yes, an appropriate time and place.

Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Get it resolved before the sun goes down. I tell couples if you go to bed angry...when you wake up you may be feeling ready to get going with a great day...but then you look at your spouse still in bed...and say, "Hold, I about forgot...I am angry." And so the stretched tension continues.

Now people need space. Some need to process. Some want to discuss it right not. But know your relationship well enough that you know what you need to do. But I whole heartedly agree that you should not let the sun go down on your anger. Get it resolved if you at all can. If you don't get it resolved is gives the devil the opportunity to make the matters worse. I have found that miscommunication or lack of communication can actually make the matters a whole lot bigger than they actually are. It would have been much better to deal with them within the day.

This includes spouses, parents to children, etc. We have grown children, but we, as most parents have gone through the phase of children yelling back...perhaps even slamming their bedroom door. Relationship timing is important. But you've got to communicate it and try.

So yes...we get angry in our family relationships. But I found this cartoon that I absolutely love (image) **"Love is caring for each other even when you're angry."**

Now it is hard when we are angry and a relationship is stretched that we are careful with what we say.

Verse 29: Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

If, when, you need to confront a family member the ultimate reason should be to build that person up or to get the relationship in a healthier state.

As I said I have a tendency to stuff. Keep my emotions on the inside. I like to avoid conflict. I told a staff member years ago that I hated conflict...her response.... "What are you doing being a pastor?" Enough said. Conflict is all around us. As long you have people that think and act differently than you there is going to be conflict...and that includes family. Just remember what you say cannot be taken back. One my favorite Children's Moments is to take a tube of tooth paste and have a child make a picture on a piece of cardboard. I then say...oops that is my only tube of toothpaste. I will need to brush my teeth tonight. Could you please put that toothpaste back in the tube? And believe it or not I have had some children try to. But you know what...you can't. Once it is out...it is out. Once your words are out....they are out. You can't put them back in. Guard your lips. When you're angry, stressed, tired, be careful what you say. Those words will remain in your memory and the other persons. And months later those words may come back to haunt you.

In the midst of stretched relationship with children or spouses or any family there are a host of emotions. Paul addresses that in **Verse 31: Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.**

When relationships are stretched there may be bitterness, wrath extreme anger, clamor, shouting, slander and false statements. And to be honest there may be times when you very much have the right to feel that way. But what do you need to do to be the peacemaker.

Author and preacher Dr. Tony Evans tells this story:

One day, two monks were walking through the countryside. They were on their way to another village to help bring in the crops. As they walked, they spied an old woman sitting at the edge of a river. She was upset because there was no bridge, and she could not get across on her own. The first monk kindly offered, "We will carry you across if you would like." "Thank you," she said gratefully, accepting their help. So the two men joined hands, lifted her between them and carried her across the river. When they got to the other side, they set her down, and she went on her way.

After they had walked another mile or so, the second monk began to complain. "Look at my clothes," he said. "They are filthy from carrying that woman across the river. And my back still hurts from lifting her. I can feel it getting stiff." The first monk just smiled and nodded his head.

A few more miles up the road, the second monk griped again, "My back is hurting me so badly, and it is all because we had to carry that silly woman across the river! I cannot go any farther because of the pain." The first monk looked down at his partner, now lying on the ground, moaning. "Have you wondered why I am not complaining?" he asked. "Your back hurts because you are still carrying the woman. But I set her down five miles ago."

That is what many of us are like in dealing with our families. We are that second monk who cannot let go. We hold the pain of the past over our loved ones' heads like a club, or we remind them every once in a while, when we want to get the upper hand, of the burden we still carry because of something they did years ago. (Dr. Anthony T. Evans, Guiding Your Family in a Misguided World.)

So what do we do? Here is what Paul says: ³² **Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.**

Oh, man....do we have to? It's tough. What's going to happen to that stretched rubber band? Who's going to get stung and popped? Or can that tension be eased by coming closer.

A saying I found which I think is profound is this: **(Image) "Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future." ~Paul Boese**

So what can we do. Let me suggest 5 things that stem from the fact that we need to be kind to one another, tenderhearted and forgiving to one another. None of these are easy to do. So here are some scenarios.

Strained Relationship “Solutions”

1. PRAY

---what is God wanting/calling you to do---

2. DO NOTHING

-which means things won't change and may possible get worse-

-or realize that you have already done everything you possibly can-

3. USE ACTIVE LISTENING

A. notice body language

B. reduce distractions when communicating

C. listen for feelings and emotions

D. repeat what you have heard... “What I hear you saying is...”

E. Communicate: “This is how I'm feeling...”

4. TRY TO REALLY UNDERSTAND WHERE THEY ARE COMING FROM

-try to put yourself in their position-

5. DO SOMETHING

-phone, email, text, personal visit-

-realize that you may be rejected-

Family relationships WILL be stretched. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. May we give these stretched relationship to God, listen to Him, and see what miraculous things He just might do!!!