

## The Family Business: Love

1. Let's start with an uncomfortable reality: a great many people would immediately dismiss a lesson entitled "The Family Business: Love" as a bit of self delusion or self congratulations. Why? They don't see love in Christians or in religious people in general. They see judgement or narrowmindedness.
2. And then there are those who have read our Bible, or portions of it, and did not see love. Rather, they saw horror upon horror. Richard Dawkins, of the leading atheists of our time, formed this picture of God from reading the Bible and being taught Bible in school: "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."
3. Some of you might bristle at that, but I fear this is trap of our own making. Many of us were taught that the Bible, every word, came out of the mouth of God and is as perfect, holy, and righteous in every aspect as God Himself is. We divorced it from its culture and its time. We stripped away any human involvement in it...
4. And then we have had to work day and night to explain away or minimize some really horrible things we see in scripture. First, let us be clear that reporting something is not the same as endorsing something. To tell us the story of Jephtah and his vow that took the life of his daughter (Judges 11), or to report what happened to Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 is NOT the same as saying God approved of it.
5. So, set those stories aside. What about the laws that are said to have come from the mouth of God? What do we do with those? In Deuteronomy 23 (right after a very uncomfortable chapter about rape), we find God banning those born outside of wedlock and any Ammonite or Moabite from the temple to the 10<sup>th</sup> generation (23:2,3,6).

6. That's going to be hard to square with the "whoever will may come" that Jesus declared or his command to pray for our enemies, to agree with them on the road, and to care for them. How do we handle this?
7. The first step is to declare that God is holy and righteous and the second is to say that we have missed the flow of scripture. (we stare at the finger and miss what the finger is pointing to). We also miss some startling twists and turns and what they mean.
8. Take the prohibition against marrying foreign women, especially Moabites. Ezra and Nehemiah dissolved marriages and ordered the men to drive their now ex-wives and children out of the city. Some believe the Book of Ruth was written as a blast against Ezra and Nehemiah for it seems to disassemble their arguments bit by bit. Matthew places Ruth in Jesus's lineage, thus reversing what Deuteronomy, Ezra and Nehemiah ordered. (Malachi – "I hate divorce" and Jesus in Matthew 5 and 19)
9. How is this possible? I would respond, how could you miss this? In his first recorded public sermon, Jesus repeatedly says "You have heard it said..." and then says "but I say to you." The people were said to be astonished that Jesus would speak to them as one who had authority.
10. Look at Rahab and the fall of Jericho. In Joshua chapter 2, they sent spies into the land. Next scene, they were in a brothel. They promised Rahab safety for her and her family if she lied. She did and they kept their promise with God's help (He kept the wall from collapsing). Rahab, named after a pagan god, lived in Israel and, once again, is in the line of Jesus in Matthew 1.
11. What is going on here? We see God ordering the genocide of entire peoples, specifically mentioning the children. In another passage, He orders all men, women and children killed but tells His men not to hurt the trees. Trees? Trees are more valuable than

people? Then we slam into the Book of Jonah and our heads swim when God absolutely accepts the foreign city's repentance and asks Jonah if he doesn't at least like the cattle!

12. We see the purity rules of Deuteronomy (some of which make us embarrassed), and then see the Book of Hosea – one of the most amazing books on the planet and a startling, in your face answer to Deuteronomy and Leviticus.
13. Oh, and all those peoples who were entirely wiped out? They show up again and again, even within a couple of chapters. What is going on here?
14. You are seeing human tracks. People have always thought that God – or the gods – favored them and thought like them. But throughout the scripture, we see God pulling us toward love. Laws about slavery changed again and again until we come up against the short letter of Philemon where Paul declares that the slave is our brother and is to be treated that way.
15. We might wish that the rise of love, the status of women, the acceptance of the foreigner, etc. might have occurred sooner, but it DID occur and it was by the hand of God.
16. All arguments about the Old Testament and any arguments we might have about religion since the first century are answered in the words and life of Jesus the Messiah. What did he say? What did he do? How did he treat the “other”? Do that. Say that. Be that.
17. That is why Paul could confidently state that circumcision was nothing and did nothing. It is why Jesus could sum up the entire law and prophets by saying “love God and love your neighbor as yourself.” Because the family business of heaven is love, not war, hate, the devaluing of others, or taking a big old bite of forbidden fruit and declaring what is right or what is wrong.

18. In my own life, I see God bending me away from my sins, my anger, judgement, harsh nature, narrowmindedness, and arrogance to...something different.
19. His opinion of me is higher than my opinion of me...and that is true for all of us who kneel to Jesus and say “your way, not mine.”
20. And his way is the family business of heaven: love.