

279.1: Family Systems (OT Gospel Doctrine Lesson 10 Updated)
[Birthright Blessings; Marriage in the Covenant](#)

This lesson is a surprisingly good introduction to the messy complexity of families, what is called family system theory. In our culture we are so focused on the individual that we lose sight of one of the most powerful forces in our lives... the families we grew up in. We focus so much on romantic love and compatibility, but often the best thing we can do for our primary relationships is heal our connection to our families of origin (as much as possible). The Sunday School episode tackles marriage straight on, so in this update I want to emphasize what is actually the focus of the scripture stories—marriage within the context of the extended family.

Productive Sunday School

1. What’s going on here? Understanding these stories from a cultural and social context
2. Could these stories have gone better today?
3. Family systems and the focus on the individual
4. Personal application (Invite reflection, give time for it, then ask if anyone wants to share)
 - a. What role did you play growing up? What was expected of you? What “scripts” did you have to follow?
 - b. What are your relationships like with your mother and father? Your siblings?
 - c. What role do you play in your extended family right now?
 - d. Who are you closest to? Who do you struggle to be close to?
 - e. What opportunities exist for healing and improvement?
5. Concluding invitation

The magic word is differentiation

Productive Sunday School

What’s going on here? Understanding these stories from a cultural and social context

These stories are also about clever challenges to cultural norms, two cultural norms in particular: patriarchy and primogeniture.

It will surprise no one that in Old Testament Israelite culture, men were in charge and were the only ones considered full people. Everything including laws is told from the perspective and for the

benefit of men. And the reason “birthright” is such a big deal in these stories is because the oldest son inherited the entire estate, not just part of it. He became the head of the household at his father’s death

Eliezar’s oath to Abraham: Endogamy (Stricter in some cultures than others, I ask students about the American caste system and get some interesting responses, but all of us usually date those we hang out with, which usually means members of the groups or “tribes” of which we are a part). Having similar backgrounds usually helps with compatibility, but isn’t essential.

Rebekah takes charge (which is striking in the patriarchal system of which she is a part, can tell that she does the most she can, which requires cleverness and even deceit. Note in the marriage process she is basically treated as an object, but she also claims ownership of the process)

Isaac is played

Jacob and Esau: Trickery rather than vulnerability and cooperation (didn’t respect each other, but were also put in competition with each other)

Could these stories have gone better today? (That would actually make an interesting TV show) We are blessed to live in a time when the importance of communication is understood and allowed. What would have happened if Isaac had been able to express his fear and frustration to his father? Rebekah clearly couldn’t communicate her concerns to her husband, since she had to stoop to trickery.

Family Systems and focus on the individual

Our idolatry of the individual (we really focus on each person and what they want and choose and do, neglecting the fact we are all part of powerful systems that impact us in overwhelming ways) It is true that we can do much to grow and be healthy. I think the most important relationship skills are: cooperation, communication, and adaptability. In romantic relationships we need to trust each other, share with each other, want to be together, do life well together, and commit to each other. We can work on all that ourselves, but we are powerfully influenced by where we came from, and have to deal with that as well.

We all exist within systems, primarily the system of our family that exists within the system of our culture (these stories illustrate both of these points well) We become what the system needs

Systems theory says that the system will get what it wants, and our lives are often a compromise between our personalities and desires, strengths and weaknesses, and what our contexts need. Birth order is an easy example of this... oldest children are often the most responsible and most strictly parented. Youngest are often spoiled and fun loving, and middle children are often left to their own devices. What is even crazier is realizing that systems act like living things. The system itself WANTS people to stay in particular roles. Once humans invest in a system, that system has its own desires and uses the humans to maintain equilibrium, keep things as they are. If we challenge the role that we are assigned others will often resist and act out without realizing what they are doing or why.

This also means that the member of the family showing the symptoms (unhealthy behavior or even sickness) is not necessarily the one causing the problems. For example, in these stories it could be argued that the lying between Isaac and Rebekah is a symptom of the unresolved tension between Isaac and Abraham.

Triangulation.

Triangulation is what happens when we don't deal directly with the issue or person. Relationships are the healthiest when we deal with each other directly, honestly, and lovingly. These Bible stories are rife with triangles. Esau is Isaac's favorite son, while Jacob is the favorite of his mother.

These stories are full of triangulation, which pretty much always backfires. If we have an issue if at all possible we should talk to the person we have an issue with, not complain to someone else. Even stranger is the fact that if we complain to a loved one about an issue they have, it actually backfires and we strengthen that relationship! As an example, if we attack a child for skipping school, they are MORE likely to do poorly in school. In the triangle between us, the child, and school, we are strengthening the unhealthy relationship between the child and school by attacking it. But if we form an alliance with the child and say "I care about you and want to help you figure out how to reach your goals, how can we get you to where you want to go" the tension between child and school weakens as the alliance between us and the child strengthens. Does that make sense? WE ARE ON THE SAME TEAM.

The paradoxical magic word: If you want to improve a relationship, figure out YOURSELF. And stand up for yourself (lovingly and constructively of course) Differentiation (is healthier for EVERY relationship. If a relationship can't handle differentiation, meaning if someone in the relationship needs to be an object or facilitator rather than a whole person, it is not a healthy relationship)

DIFFERENTIATION means maintaining your sense of self while intimate with someone else) Most of us bounce between codependency (when we feel "close" and the relationship is going well) and distancing (when something feels wrong, when we have a fight, etc) Most of us don't know how to do the hard work of being vulnerable and talking about the things that make us angry, scared, and ashamed. It is in those difficult spaces we build intimacy and trust

Personal application (Invite reflection, give time for it, then ask if anyone wants to share)

What role did you play growing up? What was expected of you? What "scripts" did you have to follow?

What are your relationships like with your mother and father? Your siblings?

What role do you play in your extended family right now?

Who are you closest to? Who do you struggle to be close to?

What opportunities exist for healing and improvement?

Conclusion: Invite everyone to reach out to a member of their family this week and see if you can improve the relationship (talk about how I have tasked myself with improving my relationship with one of my daughters, and then my siblings, and my mother). And no matter what is possible in those

relationships, getting clearer on what is going on within your own mind and heart and soul will help you be healthier, and improve your relationship with yourself and those closest to you.

Talk about compatibility (bring up the sobering wisdom present in the “sins of the fathers upon the heads of the children” not punishment, just natural consequence we need to be aware of

279.2: Family Systems (OT Gospel Doctrine Lesson 10, Sunday School)
[Birthright Blessings; Marriage in the Covenant](#)

What difference does preparing for marriage in the temple make? And how does that relate to the stories of Rebekah and Isaac and Jacob and his wives? This episode reviews these narratives, discusses the relationship between a temple marriage and successful marriage, and reviews the principles of healthy relationships.

279.3: Family Systems (OT Gospel Doctrine Lesson 10, Study Notes)
[Birthright Blessings; Marriage in the Covenant](#)

The episode continues by reviewing Jewish practices of endogamy (marrying within one’s culture), wrestles with challenging or even harmful aspects of LDS approaches to marriage and children, and concludes with a discussion of healthy approaches to relationships.