

Genesis 37 – Joseph and James

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Genesis 37 covers the story of Joseph being sold into slavery. The story begins by introducing Joseph as a teenager who is in contention with his brothers. There are three issues that are quickly revealed: first, Jacob clearly favors Joseph among his brothers; second, Joseph keeps saying things to make his brothers angry; finally, his brothers are moved by jealousy and envy to murder and enslave their brother.

Hate is a terrible thing. Jesus said in Matthew 5 that to hate is the same as murder. On multiple occasion in Genesis 37 we are told of the hate that Joseph's brothers had for Joseph. We really have three lessons to take from what happened in Genesis 37. First, how we speak to others matters. Joseph may not have sinned (or perhaps he did by boasting) in the things he said, but we must see that Joseph said things that provoked his brothers. Second, favoritism is dangerous. Jacob placed clear favoritism on Joseph (as he had on his mother), and the consequences of that brought strife. Finally, jealousy is not just bad, it is also deadly. In this instance and many others, it led to an attempt to murder.

Over a thousand years later another Jacob would write about this (in the New Testament, the name Jacob is translated "James"). *What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask.* James 4:1-2. James could very well have been thinking of this situation in his writing. In fact, all three points that we have made are made by James as well.

1. The Danger of Favoritism

In James 2:1-12, James condemned the showing of partiality and favoritism. He described the church assembly (the local church is a family) where a rich man was treated better than a poor one. James said that this was a sin. We must be careful not to show favoritism among brethren. In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus described the judgment of believers; there He declared that if we did not serve the "Least of your brethren", we failed Him. We must not merely be kind to those who are easiest to engage, but to every single one of our spiritual family members (again, the local church).

2. How You Speak Matters

James goes in in James 3:1-12 to discuss the sins of the mouth. Indeed, the entire book addresses the sins of the mouth at length. Here James made it clear that evil speak (a generic for all types of evil speech, including lying, cursing, blasphemy, slander, gossip, boasting) is the sign of an evil heart. In particular, he condemned boasting and vanity. Joseph was just a teenager, but his words hurt his brothers. Even though what he said was true, he needed to consider how to speak. We are told we must speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), and even Paul was tactful on Mars Hill in Acts 17 not to call the people idolaters, but "religious".

3. Danger of Jealousy

Immediately following the discourse on our speech, James warns us of the dangers of jealousy, envy and selfish ambition. Such feelings were clear in the brothers of Joseph. James then describes warring and murder in chapter 4 that result from jealousy. Families need to love each other, to rejoice when others are blessed, and to put away jealousy and envy. Our Heavenly Father gives all of us different gifts (1 Cor. 12:4-11); we need to be glad for what we have, not envious of what we do not.