

## To Snitch or Not to Snitch ... That is the Question

One of my favorite stories in the Old Testament is the life of Joseph in Genesis (Gen. 37–50). Joseph's life ended well, but he faced more than his share of setbacks in the first part of his life. Considering how dysfunctional his home environment was, it's a wonder he turned out so well. But then again, God had His hand in it.

Yes, I called out Jacob for having a dysfunctional family; it's a fair and honest assessment of his home. Jacob had two wives who also happened to be sisters. The fact that Jacob loved one more than the other created the ultimate sibling rivalry. They dealt with the rivalry by making a contest out of how many children they could have—which introduced two more women (Rachel and Leah's servants) into the contest. Jacob ultimately had 12 sons and 1 daughter—products of four different mothers!

The rivalry between the women was surely passed on to the kids. Amid all this dysfunction sat Joseph. Throughout his life, Joseph is seen as an upstanding and outstanding individual, yet I can't help but wonder if, in his early years, he may have contributed to the rivalry and dissension.

Joseph was the favored son, and everyone knew it. He was the first-born of Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife. And then there was The Coat. If you know anything about Joseph, you know about The Coat. The Hebrew wording for this garment is not very clear, but whether it was a robe with long sleeves or a coat with more colors than the Crayola box of 64 crayons, one thing was obvious: it was a sign of Joseph's favored status in the family.



It didn't help Joseph's situation for him to go around wearing this coat in front of his brothers. Maybe it was his only coat or maybe he was expected to wear it, but either way it was a glaring reminder to his brothers that their dad didn't love them as much as he loved Joseph.

Here's why I wonder if Joseph contributed to his own downfall: "At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended sheep with his brothers. The young man was working with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought a bad report about them to their father" (Gen. 37:2).

Was Joseph a tattletale? A snitch? That's a harsh assessment of someone who in every other way was so upright, but, hey, he was a teenager. Maybe Joseph tried to make things right before he delivered his bad report, but the

bottom line is this: no one likes a snitch. And that only fueled the brothers' hatred.

We don't have enough details to know if Joseph's report was a bad move on his part or a needed action performed as a last resort. But this incident should lead us to ask: when is it OK to deliver a bad report and when is it not?

Informing on other people (i.e., being a tattler, squealer, weasel ...) is usually seen in a bad light. Doeg the Edomite tattled on David, which led to a massacre of 85 people (1 Sam. 22:9-19). A group of Persian satraps informed on Daniel causing him to be tossed in a den of lions (Dan. 6). The Bible offers several passages dealing with gossips, meddlers, and those who stick their noses in other people's business.

- "With his mouth the ungodly destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous are rescued" (Prov. 11:9).
- "A contrary person spreads conflict, and a gossip separates close friends" (Prov. 16:28).
- "No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear" (Eph. 4:29).
- "For we hear that there are some among you who are idle. They are not busy but busybodies. Now we command and exhort such people by the Lord Jesus Christ to work quietly and provide for themselves" (2 Thess. 3:11-12).
- "Let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or a meddler" (1 Pet. 4:15).

There are occasions, though, when delivering a bad report might be necessary. If the action of another person might bring harm to himself or others, tell the appropriate people. But in all situations, follow the instruction given by Jesus.

"If your brother sins against you, go tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he won't listen, take one or two others with you, so that by the testimony of two or three witnesses every fact may be established. If he doesn't pay attention to them, tell the church" (Matt. 18:15-17).

Our goal is never simply to pass on a bad report. Our goal is to be redemptive. Do what you can to help the person, turn him from his error, and seek the good of all involved.

Maybe Joseph tried that. We just don't know. But we can know about *our* motives and actions. Our actions are to be driven by a love for Christ and a love for the other person.