

Sermon for Sunday, August 8, 2010

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THE FAMILY OF GOD

Matthew 12:46-50

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." He replied... "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:46-50).

A year after we moved to St. Louis, our youngest child injured her eye. Within hours she was in surgery, but since our families lived 800 miles away, they could not possibly join us. A hospital waiting room is a dreary place and this one was dreary even by hospital standards - until our Christian brothers and sisters began to arrive, to sit quietly with us, tell stories, and bring food, even when we said we weren't hungry. They were our family until our daughter emerged from a procedure that proved to be effective.

Someone might say "It's a shame you live so far from home." But sometimes God calls us to places that are far from our physical families. Then the church becomes our family. The church is probably the largest pro-family institution in the world. But the relationship between church and family can be complicated. To live rightly as families and as disciples, we need to get the relationship right. Matthew 12:46-50 can help us do so.

1. The Context (12:22-40)

Our passage stands at the end of a season of conflict. Someone brought a man to Jesus. This man was oppressed by demons, blind and mute (12:22). Jesus healed him so that he spoke and saw. There was a two-fold response to the miracle. The amazed crowds asked, "Is this the Son of David?" (12:23). Is he the Messiah, the promised king and deliverer of Israel? The Pharisees had another explanation (12:24). They envied Jesus (27:18) and hated the way he ignored their ideas about obedience to the law. By their lights, Jesus was a law-breaker. Therefore his undeniable supernatural power could not be from God. In their view, one alternative remained: "He casts out demons by the prince of demons." Jesus' miracle was a Satanic trick that deluded the people.

"Preposterous," said Jesus. A kingdom or a house divided against itself cannot stand. Why would Satan attack himself and so ruin his house (12:25-26)? Jesus has a better explanation. The kingdom of God has arrived. He has defeated Satan, tied him up, and now plunders his house (12:28-29). The two interpretations of Jesus' miracle are antithetical, with no middle ground between them. Either Jesus is the Son of God or a servant of the devil. Therefore, it is time to take sides, Jesus says. "Whoever is not for me is against me" (12:30). It's a tense moment, with great questions in the air: Who grasps the **significance of Jesus' signs**? Who knows that he **is** the Son of David, God's deliverer?

If we wonder how such an obviously good deed could lead to such a charge, he explains that the heart drives such antagonism and folly: "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks... The evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil" (12:34-35, English Standard Version). A little later, some Pharisees came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, we want see a miraculous sign from you" (12:38). How did they dare to ask for a sign? They had just seen one – and ascribed it to the devil. "A wicked and adulterous generation" demands signs, said Jesus and he planned to give them no more until his resurrection (12:39-40).

2. The family of Jesus (Matthew 12:46-50)

The conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders is not over. They neither repented nor believed. And Jesus' great dictum yet hangs in the air: "Whoever is not for me is against me." Whose side are you on?

Just then his mother and brothers arrive. He is inside a house, they are outside and can't reach him, so someone closer to Jesus relays the message. "Your mother and brothers are standing outside wanting to speak to you" (12:46-47). Some early manuscripts omit 12:47, which largely repeats 12:46; most include it. The scene is easier to understand with 12:47. The family is near but not there when Jesus delivers the speech of 12:48-50.¹

We don't know where Jesus' blood relatives stand: For or against. Mark says Jesus was surrounded by a crowd around the same time. His family got wind of it and came to drag him home, saying, "He is out of his mind" (3:21). John 7 says that "his own brothers did not believe in him." They mocked him, sarcastically urging him to go to Jerusalem and "show yourself to the world." (In Matthew they simply arrive).

Jesus' family seems to think they are free to interrupt his teaching. He should stop what he is doing and come talk to them. This probably seemed reasonable to everyone there, but Jesus has a habit of putting the Kingdom ahead of the family.

Matthew 10:34-38 says, "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." In Luke 14:26, Jesus says anyone who fails to love him most "cannot be my disciple." This speaks to the conflict: If a parent, spouse or child says, "If you love me, you will give up your silly faith, stop calling yourself a Christian, and come back to us" then the disciple must say, "I love you, but I love Jesus more." The disciple is willing to displease his family, even let them call him a traitor.

There is no higher love than the love of Christ. We must love our families, but we must love Jesus more. If necessary, for his sake, we must let our family become our enemy. Jesus lives what he says, so when he hears that his family is there, he does **not** stop what he is doing to talk to them. Instead, he answers with a question: "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" (12:48).

Then he waves to the crowd, "Here are my mother and brothers" (12:49). They are Jesus' family, if... "Whoever does the will of the Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (12:50). His truest family is the family of God.

The family of faith

Hear the lesson. First, Jesus said his physical family can wait. He will not forsake the family of God to please his biological family. He surveys his spiritual family and says his physical family can take its place beside – not above – them.

Second, Jesus said his spiritual family is open. Whoever does the will of the Father is in his spiritual family. He does not say, "Whoever does the will of the Father can **enter** my family." We do not **become** the brothers and sisters of Christ by our obedience. Rather, "we identify ourselves as the brothers and sisters of Christ by our obedience."²

Note: We are not right with God by means of obedience, rather obedience demonstrates that we are right with God, by prior faith.

¹ Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on Greek New Testament* 1975, page 32

² Carson, *Matthew*, page 300.

Third, Jesus points us to himself. Those who do the Father's will are the members of Jesus' family. And the teaching of Jesus reveals the Father's will. It also points them to Jesus himself and to faith in him.

Jesus' family expected preferential treatment because they were his blood relatives. Everyone thought that way in the ancient world. A person was identified three ways: by paternity, by geography and by gender. People identified Jesus these ways. He is called the "son of Joseph" (Luke 3:23, John 1:45, 6:42) and "Jesus of Nazareth" (Matt 21:11, 26:71; Mark 1:9, 16:6; Luke 4:34, 18:37; John 1:45-46, 19:19). To this day, people can define themselves by family and home town. But Jesus tells us to define ourselves by our allegiance to him. We should not ask, "Where are you from?" or "What is your school?" or "Who is your father/mother?" but "What **God** do you serve?"

So Jesus places loyalty to himself ahead of loyalty to family. He gives his first loyalty to his disciples rather than his physical family when his family comes. Jesus loved and respected his family and he respects the institution of the family. But in case of conflict, the physical family should be our **third** love. The love of God comes first, the love of God's people second, and the love of non-believing family third.

We usually don't have to make that choice between physical and spiritual families. Ideally, believers marry fellow believers and raise their children in the faith. But if a choice is necessary, the Christian family comes first. That said, we must still notice Jesus' high regard for all families, including his own.

3. Jesus' teaching on the family

Jesus' love of the family.

Jesus' deeds prove he loved his family. While on the cross, Jesus cared for his mother. He directed his beloved disciple John and his mother Mary to each other saying, "Woman, behold your son" and "Behold your mother" (John 19:26-27). Jesus' also loved his brothers. After his resurrection, he appeared to his brother James, who came to faith and became a church leader (1 Corinthians 15:7).

Jesus also teaches us to honor the family. He said the law requires believers to honor father and mother. If their parents are in need, children should meet that need, and let nothing prevent it (Matthew. 15:4-9, 19:19). Of course, parents care for children first.

Jesus' realism regarding the family.

Jesus loves the family, but he does not romanticize the family. He knows the family is as fallen as any other human institution. He knows that marriages end in divorce, that parents are cruel to children. He did not come to praise the family, but to redeem it. Even a godless family can bring joy to its members, but the highest glory and pleasure for the family comes when the family puts God first. God designed the family and He knows its limits. He knows it is a society of sinners. It blesses us most when we give it secondary honor.

We must put God first in the family in concrete ways. We put God first when we read the Bible and pray together. Options for activity and entertainment pull us in different directions, even in happy families. A godly family resists this, and makes time to be together. At supper, we do more than report on the events of the day. We take them to the Lord. We sanctify every pleasure and consecrate every pain. This is more than family devotions. It's seeing all things in light of God's word and will.

Jesus also teaches us to adjust our goals for the family. When we focus on the physical family, we tend to seek time by ourselves with the world at bay. That is necessary at times. But if we believe in the spiritual family, then we must invite the fatherless, the widowed, and the lonely into our family, too. Over one third of all American adults are single. Christian families should make room in their hearts and at their tables for these members of the family of God.

Godly families experience substantial healing of the sorrows of sin. Millions of people have never known a healthy family. They experienced nothing but tension, yelling, grabbing, coldness and

selfishness, until it all ended in cold truce or divorce. We should invite people for a glimpse of a godly home. With little effort, we can model love, respect and affection that some have never seen.

Jesus never married and Paul was apparently widowed. Both praised the single life. Their commendation of celibacy was a radical teaching at the time. We have our ideas about what singles sacrifice – companionship, intimacy. In the first century, it was more radical to give up heirs. The early church needed single people because its mission required laborers who could serve without regard for danger and its consequences for spouses or children. When someone chooses celibacy for the sake the kingdom, it shows that one's future is not guaranteed by the family, but by the church. When someone chooses singleness in order to serve God, it shows that the church is first family.³ So let's be family to each other including the single, the divorced and the widowed.

Jesus loves the family, but he also understands its weaknesses and limits. The family is foundational for society and for transmitting the faith. But the Bible says the family is broken, too. Sin poisons every aspect of family. After the fall, the harmony and affection between Adam and Eve gave way to a struggle for dominance. In Genesis 3, as God describes the curse due to sin, he tells the woman, "Your desire will be for your husband, but he will rule over you" (3:16) The idea is not that wives have insatiable longings for their husbands' affection. God is not predicting that they will plead, "Oh darling, do not leave me this day! Come linger with me in fields of roses," while man says, "Nay, woman I go forth to slay dragons."

No, God predicts that husbands and wives will struggle for dominance. The woman will desire to control her husband. But she will be thwarted, for "He will rule over you." So Adam and Eve go from "love and cherish" to "rule and dominate." Wives want a lover, but get a lord. Husbands want a caretaker, but get a scold.

In Hebrew, the statement that woman will desire her husband has the same construction as the remark that sin "desires" Cain in Genesis 4:7. Clearly sin does not have affection for Cain, but desires to exercise (wicked) control over him. We conclude that the nature of the woman's desire for her husband is not affectionate, but controlling.

The blessing of children also becomes the pain of childbearing (Genesis 3:16). The physical pain of giving birth comes first, but the pains of weeping infants, nay-saying toddlers, demanding children and slouching teenagers soon follow. Sibling rivalry mars the family from the beginning. Cain is first jealous of Abel, then murders him (Gen 4:2-10). Murder is rare, but we see struggles for dominance between Jacob and Esau, jealousy between Joseph and his brothers and between David and his brother.

The family is inadequate

Even if a family were ideal, God never intended our spouse to meet all our needs. We can't expect a spouse's protection from each danger, joy at each triumph, tears at each setback, and conversation on each topic. It's an impossible ideal. It approaches idolatry. Even married people need a circle of friends. Suppose a businessman realizes that he works long hours, in part, because he likes work more than home life. At work, he is important and admired; people gladly do him favors. At home he feels that he always arrives late, always does something wrong. A man should tell his wife about his frustration, but he might discuss it with a wise man first.

When the family is under assault, when it suffers decline, Christians rightly say there is hope **for** the family. But we do not hope **in** the family. There is hope for the family because God has redeemed families. But let's be realistic - Jesus redeems the family because it needs redemption.

The family is good, for God ordained it. He made family a means of redemption, as fathers and mothers raise children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). He expects parents to direct their children "to keep the way of the Lord" (Genesis 18:19). But the family needs help. Scripture

³ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, page 190.

says the family is good, but broken; broken, but redeemed. Some people romanticize the family and vainly pursue perfection. Others vilify the family, avoiding marriage and parenthood

Jesus says those who hear him, believe in him and follow him are his mother and brothers. We put Jesus' vision for the family into practice when the family of God strengthens the natural family. Sometimes we practice his vision when we function as the spiritual family. This requires changes in both outlook and lifestyle. Church and family are both great institutions, but there will inevitably be tensions between their claims. Sometimes the church demands too much time of its active people, accidentally undercutting the family, as parents and children are rushing off to church activities. Families cite a need for time together as they absent themselves from Christian service and fellowship. Jesus urges us to give the spiritual family its due, living as the family of the redeemed, knit together by Christ.

Almost every summer, my family and I go hiking in the Colorado Rockies. The beauty of creation is stunning, but the family time was even better. Family worship night lasted a long time. We used the camp concept of "positive bombardment", praise for the beauty of character we see in each other. But I know two things. First, most families can't do that. Let the family of God step in! Second, even the best families are broken, start to finish. Therefore, every family needs God's grace coming through godly friends. No family can reach its fullness without the help of many in the family of God.

We live in a scattered age. People move. Families break apart. We need to heed the words of Jesus. Who is my mother and father, my sisters and brothers? Whoever does the will of our father is our mother and father, our sister and brother. Let us so live that all might know the peace and blessing of life in a good family. (I know I'm speaking to many who are already convinced and to many who are resistant...)

Who

Everyone. Acts 2.42 shows it's the way of healthy Christian living. "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." The pattern is large group and small group. Teaching and worship in one, friendship in the other. This doesn't mean everyone has to be in a church program. Make your own if you wish. But the church does provide opportunities.

What

Groups follow the biblical offices of prophet, priest and king. Prophetic groups especially study and teach the word. Kingly groups especially serve in this world. With refugees: food, English, legal help, finances, finding work. Priestly groups especially pray and care for each other. Every good group should do all three, but each has an emphasis, suited to your interests or season of life. If none of these works for you, start one. Let us know so we can help you do that.

A good small group allows knowledge and care. There is sufficient closeness that you can tell when your friend is suffering. You can tell something is wrong because you know how they sound when all is well.

In real relationships we can speak into each other's life, even if it's painful. Suppose you're in relationship with someone with an obvious problem. They burst into flames of anger over small things several times in your presence. Their eating habits are sure to cause health problems in time. They made jokes that are racist or abusive. They spend money in alarming ways. You are able to speak to a true friend.

We love enough to act. We can be honest enough to speak. We admire them enough that our spirit is understood. There is enough length and depth of relationship to pray for months. There are so many griefs in this world. Some are not preventable, but some are. We should have someone in our life who is close enough that they can speak to us when we're courting trouble.

When and where

In Clayton, in our building, at the times and places we establish: Sunday school communities, C-Groups in fall and spring on Sunday nights, Discipleship groups of all kinds, Wednesday classes, two principal men's groups, three principal women's groups. Visit our web site and see our displays late this summer and fall.

Sunday morning may feel large and impersonal to you. It's hard to meet someone – the moment of greeting is nice, but so short. You don't know where to start. Consider Central's other worship communities:

Trio, Sundays at 5:00. Maybe 100 or 140 people attending, a relaxed atmosphere with a five minute fellowship and snack break in the middle and Communion weekly. Hang out afterward. You can come to both. The music, service and sermon are different.

West County fellowship at 9:30 Sunday mornings in Chesterfield, 70-100 people attending. It's an adventure of starting something new. If you want a sense that you're needed, you're needed here, but it's really obvious when the goal is to start something new.

Why

Because it's the way we grow as Christians. In the early church, among the first Christians, "day by day, attending the temple together" – the large group – "and breaking bread in their homes" – the small group – "they partook of food with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46).

We become Jesus' family by faith. We hear him say, "He who is not for me is against me" and we say, "I am for you." That happens because the Spirit is working in us and it sticks because He continues to give us life. But as with anything else, there are means that we must seize as we follow our commitment. After we commit, we have to find a way to sustain our commitment or it's a raw assertion of will, not an act of the whole person. Community makes it stick – the God-given means to keep living as his sisters and brothers.