

“Family Ties”

Introduction: Over the years you are well aware, I’m sure, that there has been a great deal of talk in Christian circles about the family. Groups like Focus on the Family, the Massachusetts Family Institute, and the Family Research Council, among many others, have sought to draw on biblical principles to strengthen the important family unit. What’s interesting is that Jesus did not teach all that much about the family, or leave us with ten steps toward better family living. And what he did say about family ties can actually make us uncomfortable.

So, while Jesus did affirm marriage, and encouraged care for ageing parents and young children, he also said that his coming would cause division within families (Lk. 12:51-53), and that unless you “hated” your father and mother, spouse and children, and brothers and sisters you couldn’t be his disciple (Lk. 14:26). And this morning we hear him give his own family the brushoff and declare that they are not really his family at all! One commentator remarks that if we don’t hear these last two verses of our text as truly shocking, we haven’t gotten the message Jesus wants us to hear:

[Jesus] looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”

Certainly, to his original, first century audience, these would’ve been scandalous words. In that day, one’s identity was tightly tied to being part of a family. The biological family was the basis of one’s social and economic life. Three generations of family could be found living under the same roof. The family was often its own business unit. But these words of Jesus can also be heard as scandalous today when the family seems to have claimed a kind of ultimate value. If you are for the family, you must be a good person, it is reasoned. Nothing better could be said about you!

Well, Jesus was certainly not against the family! But the vision of family that he holds forth, we might say, is thicker than blood and goes beyond biology. Jesus seems to be cautioning us against the idolatry, or, as one of my colleagues has put it, the cult of the family. Our ultimate devotion, says Jesus, must be to God, who is the Father of the family of faith, the family through which Jesus is carrying out his mission. Let’s see how Jesus gets there.

I. Three Groups of Observers

A. As Mark sketches out the scene, three groups appear. The first is the crowd. These folks, comprised of several hundred people, had begun to gather around Jesus and follow after him almost as soon as his miraculous ministry had begun. His healing of the sick and demon possessed caused his fame to spread, and the crowd likely consisted of both the curious, but also those who knew their need for a healer. It’s why they kept following. They don’t want him to stop what he is doing because they sense that it is good and holy. Moreover, the crowd is described by Mark as being inside the house where Jesus was, seated in a circle around him (vv. 32, 34); they are in a position of receptivity.

B. A second group is present, near enough to be called over by Jesus. They were the religious authorities, known as the teachers of the law. They considered Jesus to be out of his mind, not because he was casting out demons but because they believed he was filled and controlled by

one. Jesus was not only outside the system, but he was also in league with the devil! How else, they reasoned, could one explain his deeds of power and blasphemous claims? They couldn't dispute what he had done so they tried to discredit the cause in an attempt to stem his rising popularity. Sadly, like those caught up in conspiracy theories, those who should have been able to distinguish good from evil could not; they had become blind to the truth. They were partially correct in that his ministry had to do with the kingdom of Satan, but it had to do with its collapse, not its advance.

C. A third group then arrives. It is the biological family of Jesus, consisting of his mother and brothers. They only come as far as to stand outside of the place where Jesus was, separate from him. They desperately want him to stop what he's been doing. Mary, at this stage, it seems, was still trying to figure her son out. She seems to join with those voices who considered Jesus to be "out of his mind," especially when it came to the demonic stuff. She and his brothers had actually traveled quite a distance, not to rally around him but to round him up and take him home. It's likely they were also uncomfortable with the company he had been keeping – tax collectors and other sinners – with his pronouncing of forgiveness, and his going against the traditions of the elders by telling people how to keep the sabbath. In the minds of his mother and brothers, Jesus was in danger of dishonoring the family name if he hadn't already!

Important to note that whether out of care for him, like his family, or out of hostility toward him, like the teachers, both groups sought to control Jesus, hindering or diverting his mission. One of the truths that emerges here is that, whether we are for him or against him, Jesus can still make us uncomfortable and uneasy. It's far easier to think of him as just a good moral teacher, and nothing more. For, if he really is Lord of heaven and earth, then we really need to listen and respond to him.

How did Jesus respond to these two groups?

II. Jesus' Response

A. To the teachers of the law, Jesus offers a parable in order to point out the flaw in their thinking. For, if they were attributing the healing work of the Holy Spirit to an evil spirit, there wasn't much hope for them. A parable would either help them to see, or seal their fate. What the parable declared was that if Jesus really were in league with Satan, then he wouldn't be destroying that kingdom by dividing that house and casting demons out; it made no logical sense.

B. To his family, who had to send a representative – probably the littlest brother – into the house to get Jesus' attention (v. 31), Jesus had some shocking news. When told that his mother and brothers were outside looking for him, Jesus responded, looking at those seated in that circle around him, "Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

Notice that this observation is primarily for the crowd, almost as if Jesus is using the moment to say to them that if you're going to follow me, you will be joining a new kind of family, one whose ties go beyond biology and blood. Notice, too, that being in God's will involves listening and responding to Jesus; those who do so are really his family.

This understanding of family leads to both an invitation, and a challenge.

III. An Invitation and a Challenge

A. First, the invitation. This broader understanding of family is awfully good news for those who come from broken or challenging biological families. Abusive fathers, emotionally absent mothers, or mean brothers and sisters don't need to have the final say. As the psalmist puts it: "Even if my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me in" (27:10). Further, for those living far from home, or missing their own children, or single, or wishing they could be grandparents, we in the church can be family for one another in a way many of our biological families cannot. And if your biological family does not share your faith, your church family can certainly step in to help you keep in step with the Spirit.

The apostle personally experienced this broader family of faith on several levels. He greets the mother of a man named Rufus, "who has been a mother to me, too" (Ro. 16:13). He calls Timothy one who has been to him like "a son with his father" (Phil. 2:11). And he talks about how he has been like both a nursing mother and an encouraging father to the family of faith in Thessalonica (1Th. 2:7, 11). What a gift it is to be parents and grandparents and siblings and children for one another, as we live in the "household of faith" as Paul describes the church (Eph. 2:19).

B. Second, the challenge. This broader understanding of family that Jesus puts forth can be challenging news to those for whom family has become of primary importance. My friend, that I noted up front sometimes uses the term, the "cult of the family," does so not to disparage the family but to highlight that for some, family trumps everything and can even become an excuse for not becoming involved in the life of the church family. "We have a family commitment" it is said, as if that settles everything and is an acceptable reason for not getting involved. It may be, but it could also be that Jesus is calling you to something deeper.

It's certainly possible to neglect your family for church activities. Sadly, I know of some pastor's families who have been destroyed in that way. But Jesus, in his words about "hating" mother and brother, or bringing division to a family, is simply raising a question of ranking. He's having us consider our allegiances. All family allegiances, he wants us to know, must take a back seat to our allegiance to the one who created the family.

As Jesus sought to share God's love with the world, he had a rather shocking vision of family that he put forth. With that picture in mind:

Can we make sure that our ultimate allegiance is to the God who is our heavenly Father?

Can we care for one another, like we are family, even though by blood and biology we are not?

Can we give our biological family unit a sense of meaning and purpose as we participate in the ministry of the family of faith which is the church?

For we, as followers of Christ, are one in the Spirit, called to walk and to work, side by side, with those who share, not our blood but our faith.